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AUTHOR Bowman, Kaye; Clayton, Berwyn; Bateman, Andrea; Knight, Brian; Thomson, Peter; Hargreaves, Jo; Blom, Kaaren; Enders, Marilyn

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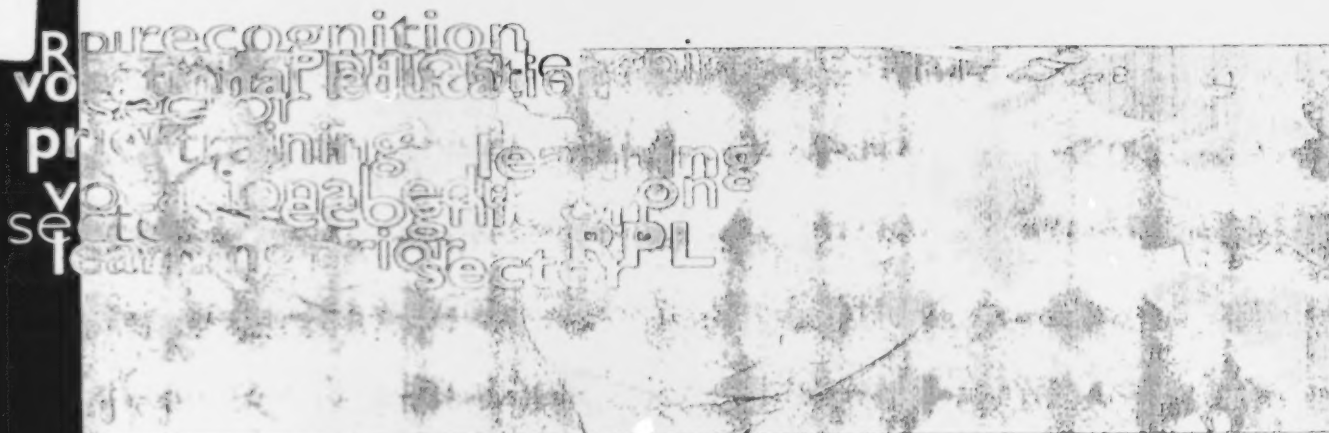
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ABSTRACT

Researchers examined the factors driving and impeding effective implementation of recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Australia's vocational education and training sector. The study relied on the following data collection activities: a literature review; an environmental scan of current policies and procedures; statistical analysis of national data; 128 structured interviews with individuals from 28 registered training organizations; focus groups; and a national forum. The existence of the Australian Quality Training Framework and ongoing interest in meeting access and equity obligations and client demands emerged as key drivers of RPL. RPL appeared less useful to young people than to older individuals. Uptake of RPL among equity groups was relatively low. No single barrier was identified as significantly affecting implementation of RPL. Some students chose not to apply for it, even when eligible, because they preferred the training itself and the experience of interacting with other students. The processes for RPL were identified as one factor that might affect RPL implementation in some contexts. Other factors included awareness and understanding of RPL and perceptions of its relevance. Nine specific strategies to facilitate more effective implementation of RPL were recommended for consideration by the National Training Qualifications Council. (Twenty-five tables/figures are included. The bibliography lists 79 references. A description of the study methodology and selected statistics are appended.) (MN)



Recognition of prior learning in the vocational education and training sector

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Kaye Bowman
Berwyn Clayton
Andrea Bateman
Brian Knight
Peter Thomson
Jo Hargreaves
Kaaren Blom
Marilyn Enders

A project for the Australian National Training Authority conducted by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research in conjunction with the University of Ballarat and the Centre Undertaking Research in Vocational Education

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NCVET Ltd, Level 11, 33 King William Street, Adelaide South Australia 5000

PO Box 8288, Station Arcade SA 5000

ph +61 8 8230 8400 fax +61 8 8212 3436

email ncvet@ncvet.edu.au

<<http://www.ncvet.edu.au>>

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Steering Committee

Mr Murray Judd, Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training

Ms Lynn Glover, Office of Training and Tertiary Education, Victoria

Ms Paula Steenholdt, Office of Post-Compulsory Education and Training, Tasmania

Mr Gary Collins, Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Western Australia

ANTA

Mr Robert Bluer

Ms Linda Arnold

Ms Sue Lawson

NCVER

Dr Kaye Bowman

Ms Jo Hargreaves

Mr Brian Knight

Mr Peter Thomson

University of Ballarat

Ms Andrea Bateman

Ms Marilyn Enders

CURVE

Ms Berwyn Clayton

Ms Kaaren Blom

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Executive summary

This report identifies and analyses what drives and what creates barriers to effective implementation of recognition of prior learning (RPL). It has been prepared to provide advice to the National Training Quality Council on how best to support registered training organisation compliance with the standards in the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) *Standards for registered training organisations*.

The project was commissioned by the Australian National Training Authority to investigate the implications for registered training organisations of recognition of prior learning arrangements in the standards.

Key drivers

Research for this project has identified compliance with the Australian Quality Training Framework as a major reason for registered training organisations' interest in recognition of prior learning. A second major reason is an ongoing interest in meeting access and equity obligations and the demands of clients. Public registered training organisations are more inclined to identify the needs of students as an impetus for RPL than private registered training organisations and state training authorities, who focus on industry and employers' needs.

Industry indicated a desire to offer recognition of prior learning to identify skill gaps and to avoid unnecessary training through recognition of current skills gained via on-the-job training.

Students said they applied for recognition of prior learning because they have some work experience and did not want to repeat their training, as well as wanting to fast-track through a qualification, thereby saving time and entering the workforce sooner.

The national vocational education and training (VET) statistics confirm that recognition of prior learning helps students who are undertaking programs within the Australian Qualifications Framework and who are seeking full qualifications. Its incidence increases with each Australian Qualifications Framework level, such that in 2001 at diploma and higher levels, 10% of students had RPL modules or units of competency compared with 2% at Australian Qualifications Framework level I and II. RPL is virtually non-existent in non-Australian Qualifications Framework, general and preparatory VET programs. Thus the national aggregate figure of 4% of total students in 2001 having received some recognition of prior learning can be misleading because it is apparently not equally applicable to all groups and all VET programs.

Age is second in importance after Australian Qualifications Framework level as a determinant of level of recognition of prior learning uptake. RPL is less useful to young people, presumably because they have less relevant experience.

National data also indicate that the uptake of RPL among equity groups is relatively low. Research for this project indicates that this is partly because many people, including members of recognised equity groups, are more likely to participate in training than seek recognition of their existing skills because they value the learning experience over the benefits to be gained by RPL. This notwithstanding, registered training organisations agreed that more could be done to assist applicants from these groups. The barriers cited were similar to those for all students.

Key barriers

No single barrier was identified as significantly affecting implementation of RPL. Some students choose not to apply for it, even when eligible, because they have a preference for the training itself and the experience of learning through interacting with fellow students.

The processes for RPL were identified as one factor that, in some contexts, might affect its implementation. Other factors include awareness and understanding of RPL and perceptions of its relevance. How RPL is resourced is a possible barrier, as is its confusing language and its differing definitions.

RPL promotion, marketing and client awareness

The Australian Quality Training Framework standard requires that registered training organisations disseminate clear information to clients about RPL prior to enrolment. Analysis of promotional material provided by registered training organisations showed that good and relevant information was readily available for clients and written in simple English. Clients acknowledged the usefulness of the available information, although many indicated that their primary source of information on RPL was 'word of mouth' rather than the promotional material. Even though informing people early about RPL is essential, its proactive promotion was not favoured by all state training authorities. Some considered that marketing RPL sets up an artificial distinction between that and other forms of assessment. Most registered training organisations promote RPL to assessors.

RPL processes and client experiences

A gap was identified between the easy-to-read promotional information provided and the RPL process itself. Some students and some registered training organisations perceived the processes used are a key barrier to RPL uptake. They found the process too daunting (the forms) and too time consuming, preparing the evidence too much work and they were often unable to locate the evidence. However, processes were not universally identified as a barrier, since 60% of students indicated their processes were reasonable and many registered training organisations thought their processes reasonable and had made attempts to minimise cost and time, although they agreed there always was room for further improvement.

Another potential process barrier commonly cited was the registered training organisations' abilities in assessment. Many registered training organisations saw RPL as a high-risk assessment pathway and that all assessments within VET were in need of continuous improvement. Students similarly require assistance with identifying and gathering evidence, in varying amounts according to their characteristics.

Resourcing arrangements for RPL

The common perception among state training authorities was that the varying resourcing models and costing arrangements for RPL influence the levels of its uptake. The data collected from state training authorities confirms that there are considerable variations in resource and costing arrangements (refer table 9).

State training authorities resource registered training organisations to undertake RPL either at the same rate as the training program itself or at a rate less than the equivalent training hours. Some fund in an equivalent manner across programs and provider types, others fund differently across programs and/or providers.

As with the resourcing of registered training organisations for RPL, the costs charged by the organisations to students for RPL also vary widely, from no cost to what the market will bear as a full fee-for-service arrangement. Just over half of the students in this research considered the costs of RPL to them to be fair and reasonable.

A number of the participants at the policy engagement forum on RPL, conducted specifically to co-ordinate with this project, noted that any 'shortfall' between government-funded programs and the 'true cost' of RPL was funded by the registered training organisations or the client. National data shows 80% of all RPL occurs within mainstream government-funded VET and a further 15 to 18% through fee-for-service activity.

Although it proved beyond the capacity of this project to determine accurately the influence of resourcing and costing arrangements for RPL on its uptake, some funding arrangements clearly might act as disincentives and can influence the perceived parity of esteem of RPL vis-à-vis the training pathway.

Language and definition

There also are language and definitional issues that hinder effective discussions on recognition of prior learning at the least, and may act as a barrier to its effective implementation. While the Australian Quality Training Framework definition of RPL has been broadly adopted by all states and territories, this definition does not clearly determine whether credit transfer and/or mutual recognition are included. Most states and territories consider RPL, credit transfer and mutual recognition to be different aspects of 'recognition' more generally.

The assumption, promoted by the Australian Quality Training Framework, that RPL is different from other forms of assessment and therefore requires different (and often more bureaucratic) procedures and administrative arrangements, was also seen as a key barrier to implementing a time and cost-effective RPL process.

Both the Australian Quality Training Framework and the national data definition of recognition of prior learning focus on RPL that occurs upon enrolment. In reality other forms of RPL occur as well, including 'fast-track' or 'early assessment' situations shortly after tuition begins and once students have a clearer understanding of the requirements for the subject and of RPL. These situations, of which there apparently are many, are generally reported as a normal enrolment leading to a 'pass'.

Advice to the National Training Quality Council

Including recognition of prior learning within the Australian Quality Training Framework standards has raised the profile of RPL among registered training organisations and state training authorities, and is facilitating improvements in its implementation in order to comply with the Australian Quality Training Framework. The RPL provisions in the Australian Quality Training Framework standards have been the focus of several audits to date.

Although mindful of the requirements of the framework, registered training organisations see RPL as a driver whose importance depends on the demands of clients for the process.

As the national data show, there are considerable amounts of RPL occurring upon enrolment where apparently relevant. As this project has confirmed, there is additional RPL-like activity occurring early in the tuition phase as well, which is being recorded as a 'pass' rather than as RPL.

To facilitate more effective implementation of recognition of prior learning, the National Training Qualifications Council could consider certain strategies:

- ◆ Revising and clarifying the Australian Quality Training Framework's definition of RPL. Does the requirement that RPL be offered prior to enrolment mean it has to be *conducted* prior to enrolment, as is the common interpretation of the AQTF RPL definition, or can it also occur early in the tuition phase? If the latter, then registered training organisations should be encouraged to refer to early assessments or fast track assessments as RPL to reduce confusion and alleviate business pressures at enrolment time.

- ❖ Referring any proposed revised definition of RPL in the Australian Quality Training Framework to the National Training Statistics Committee for consideration for use in the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information System Standard, against which national data is recorded; noting that capturing RPL that occurs early in the tuition phase as well as upon enrolment may not be successful unless some of the resourcing arrangements for RPL are altered simultaneously.
- ❖ Unambiguously confirm within the Australian Quality Training Framework that recognition of prior learning is a form of assessment, by incorporating RPL into the assessment Standard 8.1. This would clarify that RPL is different from the administrative processes of credit transfer and mutual recognition, and that RPL assessments are to be conducted under the assessment principles in Standard 8.1: they do not require procedures that are different from other assessment and often more cumbersome and bureaucratic.
- ❖ Advocating that recognition of prior learning be counted by the Australian National Training Authority, and that state training authorities fund registered training organisations for RPL at the same rate as the training program itself, in order to remove any financial disincentive to RPL uptake and to provide additional resources to improve assessment practice. This would also reinforce that RPL outcomes are equal to training pathway outcomes.
- ❖ Having further work undertaken on the resourcing and costing of RPL with a view to achieving greater transparency at the very least and possibly also greater consistency in policies across the nation to avoid confusion and possible discrimination.
- ❖ Encouraging improved and practical support services for both registered training organisations and the RPL applicant.
 - Assessment *per se* is a critical issue among registered training organisations and assessors need access to ongoing professional development and collaboration opportunities to validate and establish assessment benchmarks.
 - Also there are alternatives to the commonly used hard copy portfolio approach to obtaining evidence that need development and consideration by assessors. The candidate needs clear guidelines in plain English about the RPL evidence gathering process and support in the collection of evidence. Existing RPL evidence guides and processes remain too academic and jargon ridden for many people.
 - Finally, industry considered their involvement was of critical importance to validate assessment decision making.
- ❖ Ensuring recognition of prior learning issues are considered in the revision of the Training Package for Assessment and Workplace Training.
- ❖ Introducing an RPL module in which students can enrol and receive the close support required. This already occurs in one jurisdiction as outlined in the body of this report. The module approach highlights that RPL is a learning process in its own right. It also acknowledges teachers' time involved in supporting and implementing RPL. It may also assist with identifying and capturing all forms of RPL activity in the national data collection.
- ❖ Encouraging the development and promotion of RPL practical case study examples and developing and promoting the range of strategies identified within this report to minimise cost and time, to simplify RPL processes and to encourage more learners to engage with RPL.

Introduction

Significance of the research

A review of the literature shows that, over time, recognition of prior learning has shifted in terms of definition, application and focus in response to state/territory policies and the increased understanding of the role of assessment in a competency-based training system. The commitment to greater flexibility in the training model and in meeting client needs has meant that the concept of RPL has continued to evolve and change within states and territories and registered training organisations, also at the national level.

In the Australian National Training Authority's research paper *A national marketing strategy for VET: Meeting client needs* (2000) recognition of prior learning was identified as 'a powerful tool for bringing people into the learning system' (2000, p.93). It was seen as a key strategy to increasing motivation and building confidence, which leads to participation in learning. The Australian National Training Authority's national marketing strategy widely supported a need for strategies to improve the implementation of RPL, and to develop quick and cost effective access to the process.

With the advent of the new Australian Quality Training Framework standards for registered training organisations it was considered timely to examine how RPL was being implemented and managed by registered training organisations. Of particular interest was how the new framework requirements impacted on the practical implementation of RPL within registered training organisations. In particular what strategies these organisations were employing to offer RPL on enrolment, through a time and cost-effective process and with adequate information and support, as is required by the Australian Quality Training Framework Standards in relation to RPL.

Research undertaken

Given the timing of this project *vis a vis* the introduction of the Australian Quality Training Framework Standards for registered training organisations the research addressed how registered training organisations proposed to implement RPL to meet the framework's requirements as well as what approaches they were currently using.

In preparing this report the researchers have:

- ♦ reviewed relevant literature
- ♦ summarised current statistical information on RPL-related activity
- ♦ mapped current resources and materials available to support RPL and reviewed their content, usage and audience awareness
- ♦ mapped state and territory resourcing and costing arrangements for RPL and compared them with jurisdictional levels of uptake of RPL
- ♦ outlined RPL processes and practices and considered provider level compliance with the standards for registered training organisations
- ♦ identified and analysed the tangible drivers and barriers to the effective implementation of RPL (including from individual, industry-specific, provider and system-based case studies)

- ◇ identified and discussed the key issues and implications for registered training organisation compliance with RPL requirements of the AQTF Standards.

The project methodology is detailed in appendix 1.

Issues explored

The RPL issues explored in the report are those identified in the Australian Quality Training Framework Standards relating to RPL practice and include:

- ◇ promotion, marketing and client awareness
- ◇ processes and client experiences.

Also explored are:

- ◇ industry perspectives
- ◇ RPL uptake and benchmarks
- ◇ equity considerations
- ◇ resourcing and costing arrangements
- ◇ language and definition.

Report organisation

The identified key drivers and barriers to the effective implementation of recognition of prior learning are described in overview in the next chapter of this report. A one-page chapter follows on the specifications relating to RPL in the Australian Quality Training Framework as an introduction to a major chapter on RPL in practice. This is followed by a short chapter covering industry perspectives on the process. Much of the recognition activity they fund and facilitate is not reported in the national statistics. There are interesting insights and lessons to be learned from their RPL practices and experiences. How it is reported in the national data collection is explained in a one-page chapter as an introduction to a chapter on the reported uptake of RPL and possible reasons for these levels. The final chapter considers its effective implementation and the requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework as well as our advice.

Key drivers and barriers

The key drivers and barriers to the effective implementation of recognition of prior learning are summarised in this section.

Key drivers

Compliance with the Australian Quality Training Framework is now a major driver behind registered training organisations interest in RPL coupled with an ongoing interest in meeting access and equity obligations and the demands of clients. State training authorities had similar views and provided examples of specific clients and conditions where they thought RPL was most relevant. Individuals' main reasons for using RPL were to have their work experiences recognised towards a qualification, saving unnecessary training and time. Industry indicated a desire to offer training to fill skill gaps and to avoid unnecessary training through recognition of current skills.

Table 1: Key drivers

Identified by:	
Registered training organisations	AQTF compliance Customer services, particularly addressing: ◇ access and equity ◇ efficiency ◇ repeat business ◇ student demand (public registered training organisations) ◇ industry demand (private and assessment-only registered training organisations)
State/territory training authorities	New and emerging training package implementation Industry legislation and licensing requirements, including requirements for new apprenticeship centres Industry restructuring and downsizing New immigrants
Industry	Up-skilling and recognising skills/identifying skill gaps (to meet human resource and enterprise bargaining requirements and to identify training needs)
Students	Had work experience and did not want to repeat skills and knowledge in training To gain a qualification as work requirements Simply to gain a qualification

Registered training organisations

As would be expected given the timing of this research, registered training organisations commonly identified the implementation of the Australian Quality Training Framework standards for registered training organisations as the major incentive for the provision of RPL.

The next most important driver nominated was access and equity. Registered training organisations considered recognition of prior learning an essential service to their clients and a means of encouraging people to engage or re-engage in training. A number of private registered training organisations noted

that the demands of industry were the most important driver for RPL. Public registered training organisations were more inclined to identify the needs of students as more critical, and to view RPL as a means of improving educational outcomes, using scarce resources more efficiently, increasing student numbers and marketing the services of their organisation more effectively.

For the assessment-only registered training organisations included in this study, the key drivers were industry's need to identify skill gaps, reduce unnecessary training, recognise current skills gained through on-the-job training and provide opportunities for further training in order for people to gain nationally recognised qualifications.

State/territory training authorities

In general, recognition of prior learning was seen as a critical aspect of the implementation of the Australian Quality Training Framework. Authority representatives indicated that it was critical to emerging industries or sectors where training or a training package were not previously available. Industries where downsizing has occurred, changes in legislation and licensing requirements, changes in apprenticeship requirements (where employers required certification) as well as recognition needs of new immigrants were all seen as significant drivers of the process. In some instances states/territories had funded RPL activity to meet a specific need or legislative requirement.

Students

The main reasons for students wanting RPL stem from a desire to 'fast-track'. The most significant benefit that students could see was the reduction of time for getting their qualification: 'The sooner I can get a certificate, the sooner I can get into the workforce'. The acknowledgement of previous learning and work experience was also seen as highly valuable. RPL recipients in this study:

- ◆ had some work experience and did not want to repeat their training (43.5%)
- ◆ needed to achieve the credential for their current employment or to gain a promotion (17.4%)
- ◆ simply wanted to gain the qualification (17.4%)
- ◆ wished to up-grade their skills because the courses they had previously done had changed and the competencies were different (13%).

The top three reasons nominated by both public and private registered training organisation assessors for clients wanting RPL were similar to those nominated by students and included the desire to:

- ◆ save time and fast track through the course (67% public and 23% private)
- ◆ gain a qualification (36.4% public and 77% private)
- ◆ avoid undertaking training (33.3% public and 30.7% private).

Why RPL?

Sally says she was thrilled to be told at her enrolment interview that she could apply for recognition of prior learning. The teacher involved spent some time explaining the requirements, and Sally then collected the required evidence. She did not find that process onerous, as she tends to keep professional and work related documentation anyway. She thought it had probably taken her only about a week to put together everything she needed. She could no longer remember what RPL had cost, but described it nonetheless as 'a small price to pay - RPL is a gift as far as I'm concerned'. The best things about RPL for her as an adult student were the time it saved her ('something I don't have much of') and the acknowledgement of her existing skills ('the process itself was validating for me'). Sally remembers other students in her classes, though, who were less confident than she was, who would not apply for RPL because of their 'lack of confidence, fear of failure and sense of being judged'. Sally, now working in her chosen field, tells other people about RPL all the time - 'they don't know about it'.

Student, public registered training organisation

Why not RPL?

Some students prefer to undertake the training program itself rather than undertake recognition of prior learning because they value the learning experience more, as has been previously mentioned. Registered training organisations participating in this research were asked their views on why some students who could apply for RPL choose not to do so. The top reasons public and private registered training organisation assessors gave for applicants not wanting to use RPL reflected the reasons given by students and are outlined in the following table; a preference to do the course is the dominant reason given.

Table 2: Provider perceptions on why applicants do not use RPL

	Public providers (%)	Private providers (%)
A preference to do the course to revise skills and knowledge or to learn more	73	39
Too time consuming	36	46
Too much work to prepare evidence	36	31
Lack of understanding of process or confidence	34	—
A preference for interaction with fellow students	27	—
Inability to locate the evidence	—	23

Note: Figures do not add to 100 because multiple responses were allowed.

Managers and assessors from registered training organisations were also asked why some students who are awarded RPL still elect to engage in the training. The majority of responses related to the desire for learning (valuing class contact, refreshing old skills, need to better understand theory). Their responses focused on wanting to pick up new information, to update skills and broaden their knowledge. Class contact and the learning process were seen as valuable, as well as wanting a graded result, although no registered training organisations responding to this research were grading competency-based assessment. In addition, there is a perception that it is easier to turn up to class than to gather the evidence. The other important point made by some students is that they do not use RPL because they need to make up a full study load in order to receive Austudy payments.

Why not RPL?

It is not uncommon for people to go through the whole process of skills recognition and then not go forward with it, even when they are granted a significant amount of RPL. They are provided with details about the evidence that they need and they take considerable time and care about collecting all of their evidence together. They present the portfolio and we conduct the assessments. But when it comes to it, they decide that it would be good to learn with the group. They like the idea of the social interaction and they feel that they can still learn a lot. They say that things have probably changed – particularly in relation to legislation and the like. We put in the time and the effort to give them a positive RPL outcome. But they see other benefits and choose to go through all the learning again. It can be disappointing for us, but it is obviously confirming for these women who may have been in the industry for years. What it all costs, however, is another issue.

NSW Community Services and Health

Key barriers

No single significant barrier was identified to the effective implementation of recognition of prior learning. Instead several factors were identified that, in some contexts, affect RPL implementation. These factors are identified in the following table, and discussed in detail in the main chapter on RPL in practice.

Table 3: Key barriers

Identified as:	
Awareness and perception	Registered training organisations have various views on RPL applicability. RPL outcomes are not valued as equal to training outcomes. Individuals lack confidence to undertake the process or do not know about RPL.
Complex processes	Takes too much time. Timing is wrong (being at enrolment time when registered training organisations are most busy). Information provided for evidence collection is too complex and has no support. Assessment needs quality, context and industry involvement. Risks are involved.
Inadequate support	Individuals need assistance to gather evidence. Assessors need ongoing professional development. Registered training organisations need improved funding models.
Confusing language	RPL is intermittently used with terms such as recognition of current competencies, fast track assessment, accelerated learning and credit transfer.

RPL in the Australian Quality Training Framework

For the purposes of this project the Australian Quality Training Framework definition of RPL applied, but with the following provision: 'recognition of prior learning does not include the granting of credit for equivalent studies at another institution', nor does it include mutual recognition.

AQTF definition of RPL

Recognition of prior learning means recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred. Under the Australian Quality Training Framework, competencies may be attained in a number of ways. This includes through any combination of formal or informal training and education, work experience or general life experience. In order to grant RPL, the assessor must be confident that the candidate is currently competent against the endorsed industry or enterprise competency standards or outcomes specified in Australian Qualifications Framework accredited courses. The evidence may take a variety of forms and could include certification, references from past employers, testimonials from clients and work samples. The assessor must ensure that the evidence is authentic, valid, reliable, current and sufficient.

AQTF standards on RPL (extract)

Standard 6 Access and equity and client service

The registered training organisation applies access and equity principles and provides timely and appropriate information, advice and support services which assist clients to identify and achieve their desired outcomes.

- 6.1 The registered training organisation's policies and procedures must incorporate access and equity principles.
- 6.3 The registered training organisation must disseminate clear information to each client, prior to enrolment, about [each of the following]:
 - xi Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) arrangements

Standard 8 Registered training organisations assessments

The registered training organisation's assessments meet the requirements of the endorsed components of Training Packages and the outcomes specified in accredited courses within the scope of its registration.

- 8.2 a The registered training organisation must ensure that RPL is offered to all applicants on enrolment
- b The RTO must have an RPL process that:
 - i is structured to minimise the time and cost to applicants; and
 - ii provides adequate information and support to enable applicants to gather reliable evidence to support their claim for recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred.

Standards for Registered Training Organisations (AQTF, 2001)

RPL in practice

Raising client awareness about RPL

The Australian Quality Training Framework standard specifies that the registered training organisations must disseminate clear information about recognition of prior learning arrangements to each client prior to enrolment.

What registered training organisations are doing

All registered training organisations included in this study were found to have initiated broad-ranging dissemination strategies to inform clients about RPL prior to and on enrolment. Information in course handbooks, advertising brochures, information sessions for intending applicants, advice at interviews and specific registered training organisations website pages are the common sources used. There were a number of instances of videos on skills recognition, of online support, telephone help-lines and the inclusion of information on recognition processes in student diaries.

Managers indicated that in addition to these organisation-wide initiatives, teaching areas utilised RPL manuals, course-based brochures, posters and Power Point displays to identify options and opportunities for clients to seek recognition of their existing skills. Heads of department, program managers or assessors were responsible for confirming that clients had been made aware of the RPL process at enrolment.

Over half of the managers and assessors in this study indicated that their registered training organisation had a policy of active promotion of RPL. Organisation-wide resource kits were being used to help to 'sell' the value of the process to clients. Several states had statewide recognition promotion policies and a number of states were developing not only promotional materials online, but also the facility for clients to apply for RPL online.

An analysis of the documentation provided to learners indicates the following information about RPL was consistently covered:

- ✧ simple definitions ('What's it all about?')
- ✧ a listing of the benefits of recognition for clients
- ✧ the steps involved in the process
- ✧ details of how to apply
- ✧ brief descriptions of the types of evidence needed
- ✧ contacts for support or further information.

Despite the considerable emphasis that registered training organisations placed on print-based and web-based information, three-quarters of learners in this study stated that they had heard about RPL through personal interaction in face-to-face interviews, information evenings, through work colleagues or by directly asking teachers or course advisers. Only a fifth found out about RPL purely by accessing printed materials such as brochures, handbooks and module guides.

Students acknowledged that the information they had received provided a general overview of RPL, details of costs, guidelines for collecting evidence and particulars about the application process. Of the students in this study, 70% thought that the material they had received covered everything they needed. Others were not sure. Only a small number of students indicated that they had received little or no information about the process or what they were required to do to seek recognition.

Promotion of RPL to assessors was also occurring within the majority of the registered training organisations included in this research. Assessors were being provided with guidelines and strategies for the conduct of the recognition process. At the same time teaching areas or departments have collated materials to support the RPL process at the course or module level. Some of these documents are quite complex and include detailed information about the learning outcomes, rules of evidence, principles of assessment and indicators of acceptable evidence. It is apparent from these documents that registered training organisations are attempting to establish consistent RPL approaches and decision-making across assessors.

Acknowledging the need for quality information

One large public registered training organisation is currently developing a website in order to offer a 'one-stop shop' that will be the single, authoritative source of RPL information, not only for their students, but also for their staff. The site will include an online help facility, and is seen as a means of improving the efficiency with which such information is disseminated.

Currently, the institute relies on comprehensive written documentation (student and course guides all mention recognition) and a video. The institute's call centre is equipped to deal with enquiries by being provided with frequently asked questions (FAQ) sheets relating to recognition (as they term the RPL process). All course documentation refers to the provision of recognition services, as do introductory information sessions. In class, students sign off against having received information relating to assessment, including recognition.

The institute's investment in the production of quality recognition materials, including support materials for educational staff, is regarded as a means of saving time and reducing the costs involved. As the institute's manager of RPL said, 'recognition takes a long time if either party doesn't have the right materials!'. She saw the offer of recognition as a marketing tool for her institute.

What state training authorities are doing

In most instances state training authorities are referring registered training organisations to the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs/Australian National Training Authority Training Package Assessment Materials Project (2001). This project provided the VET sector with 10 assessment guides, one specifically related to RPL. *Guide 3: Recognition resource* is the most widely available public resource related to RPL. This guide attempted to provide registered training organisations and assessors with a framework in which to develop an RPL (or recognition) assessment system. This recognition framework is not confined to a preconceived process (and structure) such as that proposed in the seminal project of the then Broadmeadows TAFE and Ford Motor Company (Broadmeadows TAFE 1992) but allows the registered training organisations to develop their own system according to the target group, needs and resources.

In addition, at least two state training authorities (Western Australia and South Australia) have developed and provided their registered training organisations with purposely developed guidelines and information relating to the implementation of RPL or skills recognition processes.

There was no consensus across the jurisdictions regarding the proactive promotion of RPL. In a number of instances states and/or territories had promoted it and generally considered the process to be effective in increasing awareness and the uptake of RPL. A number of state and territory training authorities indicated that a marketing strategy was needed for registered training organisations to inform staff and increase the profile of RPL at the registered training organisation level.

Some jurisdictions considered that marketing recognition of prior learning was in fact a cause of a number of issues surrounding RPL. They felt that raising the profile of RPL created the assumption

that it was different from assessment and therefore needed separate processes in place. It was strongly proposed by at least one state training authority that marketing to registered training organisations should focus on undertaking quality assessments (including the notion of flexibility) rather than on RPL *per se* and a separate RPL process.

Language of RPL

What was evident across all documentation was the 'VET' language or jargon being inconsistently used by registered training organisations. This is compounded by a number of factors:

- ✧ There are various related processes such as credit transfer and credit related to mutual recognition requirements, and whether the AQTF definition of RPL includes these notions is unclear.
- ✧ Across the literature and in practice there are various definitions and terms in use pertaining to RPL including 'recognition of current competencies' (RCC), 'skills recognition'¹ and 'recognition'².
- ✧ Interpretation of RPL is further confused when clients are offered various opportunities for skills recognition through processes referred to as accelerated learning, early assessment and fast-tracking, all offered after tuition has begun.

Interpretation of RPL

"... we encourage people to do skills recognition as part of normal delivery ... it is not a formal application, they simply enrol in the subject and are given the opportunity to *accelerate* through if they believe they have got the skills ... or they can have *challenge testing* ... it is much simpler than someone going off and getting a portfolio of evidence. It is simpler, quicker for the client and it proves to us that they have the skills ...".

As one informant from an assessment-only registered training organisation noted, the VET terminology and that attached to RPL is simply confusing and misleading. Terms such as 'advanced standing', 'skills recognition', 'units of competency', 'mandatory evidence' requirements may be influential in turning inexperienced applicants away from accessing the process.

Keating, Kelly and Smith (1998) and Bateman and Knight (2003) argue that recognition of prior learning is an assessment and that its artificial separation from assessment is based on a false premise which only causes confusion and leads to cumbersome RPL models. The recent report from Queensland (Qld DET 2001) indicates that the line between where RPL finishes and accelerated assessment starts blurs the definition. Keating et al. (1998) suggest that a flexible and broad assessment system, policy and procedures should accommodate all purposes of assessments, including RPL. The responses at the policy engagement forum and from interviews with state training authorities and registered training organisations also raised this issue regarding the delineation between assessment and RPL.

It is clear that there are strong preferences by jurisdictions and providers about which RPL term to use and that, despite the language being different across jurisdictions and registered training organisations, the concept of RPL is well understood and is being promoted and implemented in its many guises. However, it may be that the usage debate interferes with effective implementation (client confusion and under-utilisation of recognition services) and reporting of recognition activity (there is much more RPL occurring than is being reported).

¹ Western Australian state training authority

² DETYA/ANTA Training Package Assessment Project: Guide 3, 2001

Concurrent to this project, the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board commissioned a project to identify obstacles to the implementation of RPL within the schools, VET, higher education and adult community education sectors and to identify mechanisms that would facilitate the increased use of RPL within and across sectors. A consortium led by Southern Cross University conducted the project. In December 2002 two draft papers were available from the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board project, a discussion paper *Australian Qualifications Framework national principles and operational guidelines in post-compulsory education and training* and a project report, *Recognition of prior learning: Policy and practice in Australia*.

The Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board research confirms the amount of jargon and definitional issues associated with RPL. While the majority of the draft national common RPL principles and operational guidelines proposed in the discussion paper and the policy and practice recommendations covered in the report are in line with this research, the National Training Qualifications Council should be mindful of the outcomes of the Australian Qualifications FrameworkAB project, particularly as they relate to RPL definitions and forms of credit in the VET sector.

Processes and how they influence outcomes

The Australian Quality Training Framework Standard specifies that registered training organisations must have an RPL process that is structured to minimise time and cost to applicants.

For managers and assessors in both private and public registered training organisations, the RPL processes that they were using were often seen to be the major barrier to its effective implementation. The state training authorities also identified bureaucratic processes developed by registered training organisations among the main perceived barriers, along with disparate funding models, the quality of assessments and registered training organisations' resistance to RPL.

Many state training authorities noted that training providers tended to establish processes that were based on *old* practices and assumptions and therefore were often complex, time consuming, tedious, and labour and resource intensive. Often RPL practices required additional administrative processes and from the perspective of the clients were often confusing.

Time and timing

Training providers indicated that the time being taken for information dissemination, the collection of evidence and the process of assessment decision-making were perceived as complex, sometimes clumsy and often excessively time consuming.

In almost all instances, assessors indicated that time required to complete RPL assessments was a burden, which in some cases fell well beyond their designated workloads. They suggested that it was not just a matter of making an assessment decision and recording it. RPL also involved the dissemination of information, the conduct of initial workshops or information sessions and the provision of additional support for applicants as they made decisions about what evidence to provide. In the majority of cases, all of this activity was occurring at or just before the enrolment of students in training programs, that is, at the busiest times for registered training organisations.

The commitment of registered training organisations to conducting RPL assessments prior to enrolment has had considerable logistical implications for them and a number of informants commented that the emphasis on an up-front approach generated some reluctance amongst assessors. Getting RPL results back to applicants in a timely way was also raised as an issue by some assessors and managers.

A number of suggestions were made about RPL being offered continuously throughout training programs. In that way, assessor workload could be better managed. One informant suggested that

there were also likely to be better outcomes for learners with an on-going skills assessment process in place.

RPL offered throughout the training

Our industry (hospitality) is one where employees are very mobile. Everyone moves around a good deal and they get experience doing a range of things in a range of ways. We also have people who may have literacy and language problems and who are not confident about asking for RPL, even though they have work experience. Everyone goes through the learner orientation subject on how to gather their evidence, but the language is not what they are used to. We do one-to-one counselling, but some do not feel ready to apply for RPL. They do not feel that they have the competencies or the confidence to tackle it so early.

As we go through the course, then some students realise that they can do the things that they are studying already. Every time this happens, we talk about it and we encourage them to apply for RPL. So what we are actually doing is offering RPL continuously through the course. The first lesson of every module we cover the evidence needed to get RPL. It is 'up-front' all the way through. The idea of doing RPL at enrolment is fine, but many are simply not ready. Continuous RPL works better for us.

Costs and their influence

Costs to clients

Costs charged to applicants vary from state to state, discipline to discipline, and in public providers between government-funded 'profile' hours and fee for service. In most instances in private providers the cost of recognition of prior learning is determined on a fee-for-service basis, unless they are in receipt of government funding and therefore ministerial directions may apply.

Registered training organisation decisions about costs to clients

Public registered training organisations

Senior management of public registered training organisations, often in consultation with state and territory training authorities, generally made the decisions about RPL costings. In some instances costs were determined by ministerial direction. Resourcing formulas were developed within individual registered training organisations. They were based on hourly rates, lecturer time or student contact hour. Costs of RPL varied according to educational programs and whether recognition relates to 'profile' hours or fee for service. In the case of centralised systems, decisions were often made for application in all public registered training organisations covered by that system. (Also refer to the section in this report on the impact of resourcing and costing arrangements on RPL uptake).

Private registered training organisations

The majority of private registered training organisations had developed differential rates for RPL either on the basis of the industry sector or Australian Qualifications Framework level. Costs were decided on the basis of time taken (of the organisation and assessor) and also what the market would bear. This was a particularly pertinent factor for assessment-only registered training organisations, who receive no government support for their services.

Enterprise registered training organisations

For enterprise registered training organisations, unlike other providers, the cost of RPL provision was not seen as an issue. However, that does not mean that they have not considered ways in which to minimise the costs for their learners and for themselves as businesses. In both cases, these efforts tended to focus on streamlining the processes. There was an acceptance that time spent in preparation saved time later on, and hence good guidelines and assessment tools were considered vital to the recognition process. One strategy that was seen to be highly effective was to conduct initial on-the-job peer assessment (by peers who are qualified workplace assessors). Enterprises

tended to believe, therefore, that both the time and financial commitment required for the recognition process was 'about right.'

Applicant time and cost commitments

Managers and assessors were asked to rate the time and cost implications for applicants seeking recognition of prior learning. The majority considered that neither the time committed, nor the costs incurred, was excessive.

In relation to the cost of RPL, just over half of the students to this research considered the cost to be fair and reasonable. When matched with the time that they saved, several of them said that it was quite inexpensive and much cheaper than face-to-face in a classroom. A somewhat smaller number of students suggested that RPL was far too expensive, with one of these commenting that: 'Considering that I didn't attend class, it should have cost less'.

In relation to the time taken for the RPL process, 60% of the students commented that the time they had dedicated to the process of evidence collection was both relatively brief and reasonable. The remainder suggested that it did take them a considerable amount of time to collate their documentation but this was not necessarily a problem for them. For example, one student commented:

I would have liked it to have been a lot quicker, but I realise that this is not always feasible. Thoroughness is required.

The complexity of the evidence and the range of sources were influential in the ease of preparation and time commitment required. The abilities of the particular applicant would also impact upon the time taken. However, just over half of the students in this research considered that the time it took to get a result after submitting their evidence was both reasonable and relatively quick. The rest commented that it took far too long to be informed of the outcomes. A number of these acknowledged, however, that it was not an easy process and it was generally occurring at a busy time in the year, that is, at the time of enrolment.

Of the students in this research, 61% considered that their RPL processes did not need improvement. For those who thought that it could be improved, the slowness and complexity of the process were seen to be the major concerns. Some students suggested that they did not know about it early enough in their programs and it would be helpful if they were advised whether they might be eligible before they enrolled. One student from a workplace commented:

I would like to have known about it before I applied to do the training. I talk about it with people in the field, and they certainly don't know anything about it. I am telling them now.

Strategies to minimise cost, time and simplify processes

Both managers and assessors were asked to identify any attempts that had been made to minimise the time and costs involved with RPL for applicants and their organisations.

To applicants

In both private and public registered training organisations the majority of managers and assessors indicated that some strategies have been put in place to cut time and costs associated with RPL for applicants. The list of strategies provided by public registered training organisations is extensive, e.g:

- ◇ streamlining of processes
- ◇ conducting workshops to work applicants through the process
- ◇ online support and application
- ◇ single one-stop-shop contact for all applicants

- ◇ pre-assessment interviews with direct assistance for portfolio development
- ◇ exemplar and evidence guidelines developed for all units of competency or modules
- ◇ challenge testing.

In addition, private registered training organisations emphasised the importance of simplifying the process and providing up-front information (especially of the evidence required) early in the process, underpinned by on-going guidance.

To registered training organisations

In public registered training organisations the majority of managers and assessors were able to identify some strategies that had been put in place to minimise the time and costs on RPL provision. In contrast, only half of the managers and assessors in private registered training organisations in the study indicated that their registered training organisation had attempted to minimise cost and time to the organisation. Their emphases were placed more on infrastructure and administrative efficiencies and keeping within budget.

Strategies identified by public registered training organisations included:

- ◇ delegating some of the initial assessment for recognition purposes to workplace supervisors
- ◇ pre-assessment screening of applicants to identify those with the greatest potential to be readily granted recognition
- ◇ the implementation of risk-minimisation strategies including the conduct of interviews only when there was some question about applicant competence or the quality of the evidence being provided
- ◇ including opportunities for RPL throughout training programs rather than just in an up-front process prior to or at enrolment
- ◇ not aiming for one RPL process or a 'one size fits all' framework
- ◇ simplification of the paperwork associated with both evidence collection and the assessment decision
- ◇ reworking information for assessors ensuring procedures and evidence guidelines were precise and able to be consistently applied
- ◇ challenge testing or early assessment
- ◇ being able to respond flexibly with training needs once RPL has been determined
- ◇ enrolment in preparatory modules to provide support for learners as they assess the evidence requirements and mechanisms for applying for recognition of skills.

The modular approach to supporting RPL applicants and recognising teaching effort

One registered training organisation offers students the opportunity to enrol in a module, *Preparation for skills recognition*, to provide them with extensive support in preparing their RPL application. Students learn skills of self-assessment as well as the skills and knowledge they need to understand VET, particularly in terms of the qualification for which they are seeking recognition. On completion of the module, students submit their completed RPL application and are granted recognition on the basis of it. The module itself is not assessable. This approach gives teachers the time to deliver the skills and knowledge required for students to successfully understand the RPL concept and the evidence requirements.

An RPL module in which students can enrol would ensure they receive the close support required in preparing for skills recognition. The module is additional to a student's program of study. A teacher is allocated to the module as a facilitator and support person, and the hours are counted as part of the teacher's annual load. This approach highlights that RPL is a learning process in its own right. It also acknowledges teachers' time involved in supporting and implementing RPL. Thus the

module approach could provide a cost-effective, practical and beneficial process to recognition for candidates, funding for the teaching department and acknowledgement of the teacher's effort against their annual teaching load.

The assessment process

The Australian Quality Training Framework Standard specifies that registered training organisations must provide adequate information and support to enable applicants to gather reliable evidence to support their claim for recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred.

Assisting applicants to gather quality evidence

An analysis of the promotional documentation provided by registered training organisations to this study showed they had made considerable effort to ensure that brochures, inserts in students handbooks and diaries and the like are presented in plain English. The same could not be said of the range of forms that applicants were required to complete as part of the recognition and evidence gathering process. Generally these were extensive, complex and requiring high-level communication skills.

Registered training organisations were generally providing applicants with handouts that included guidelines covering all of the units of competency or module outcomes, in an attempt to support reliable and valid evidence collection. Checklists and guidelines relating to the preparation of evidence varied across the registered training organisations and across the Australian Qualifications Framework levels. In some instances these were very simple and did not require the candidate to provide a great deal of written evidence. In other examples clients were asked to prepare extensive written material for each of the units of competency, elements and performance criteria for which they were attempting to gain recognition. Extensive listings of mandatory evidence may deter candidates who would otherwise apply.

Formal assistance from instructors together with information sessions, interviews and counselling were also quite strongly evident.

Both registered training organisations and students in this project identified issues with the difficulty (and inability) to supply evidence in some areas. In some instances there is no generation of documentation (for example human services) and in others the portfolio approach for evidence gathering is not sufficient.

Gathering evidence

One enterprise registered training organisation has gone through their training package to identify what the critical pieces of evidence are that must be provided by learners to receive recognition. The registered training organisation has established an approach that is based on candidates using a self-assessment tool to clarify the skills and experiences that they already possess. It is a similar approach to the Frontline management Initiative Toolbox. They are asked to complete a checklist which asks them to consider 'Things I know', 'Things I do' and 'The documents that I have'. However, as the learners are working in a human services area where documentary evidence cannot always be made readily available because of client confidentiality issues, the latter are not easy to collect.

Assessors had also developed sample materials, evidence sheets, assessment plans and checklists to generate consistent outcomes. These included quality assurance managers checking evidence, 'spot checks' of evidence and judgements, or RPL experts assisting subject matter experts to make assessment decisions against standard checklists. Mostly, quality assurance of RPL was being implemented at the front-end via standardised information and exemplars for applicants and assessors. Quality assurance during and after assessment decision-making was limited.

Much of the material provided to students on RPL suggests that hard-copy evidence or even a portfolio will need to be submitted to establish whether a student meets the required criteria. It could be argued that a methodology that relies on hard copy evidence would not be appropriate for all learners, since many have experience in areas which do not or cannot generate such evidence. It is also argued that this approach is burdensome for both learners and providers, and many simply do not bother, electing instead to enrol and attend classes rather than take the RPL pathway.

Clearly, the hard-copy or portfolio methodology for obtaining evidence to support RPL is not applicable to all learners, but there are not necessarily clear-cut, practical alternatives which will deliver valid and reliable RPL assessments. One possible alternative to the hard-copy or portfolio methodology for assessing RPL is to administer the same assessment to recognition applicants as would be administered to students at the end of a period of tuition. Administratively, this is not necessarily an easy approach unless the provider has set up systems to administer assessments as and when required. Also, many learners are assessed via a combination of formative and summative activities which form part of an overall 'assessment for learning' strategy adopted by teachers. This approach to assessment, which is usually integral to the broader teaching program, does not translate easily to RPL situations as it requires an ongoing teaching and learning context.

Another model which is applicable is the use of a 'professional conversation' to establish the applicant's eligibility for RPL (Bowen-Clewly 2002). This model has the advantage that it can be used in conjunction with hard-copy or portfolio evidence if required, and can be administered up-front. The main disadvantage is that it requires the assessor to have a high level of expertise in conducting interviews to elicit and evaluate evidence of the applicant's knowledge and skills.

Meeting the principles of assessment

Within public registered training organisations, 70% of managers and 85% of assessors are confident that their assessment processes adequately comply with the principles of assessment. Less than 30% of managers and even fewer assessors suggested that their processes needed improvement. A number of registered training organisations indicated that while they considered their current processes were adequate they suggested there would always be room for improvement. Concerns expressed in meeting the principles of assessment centred on issues of:

- ❖ consistency of interpretation of evidence requirements
- ❖ validity of the evidence being collected
- ❖ sufficiency of the evidence
- ❖ lack of verification processes in place.

Responses from private registered training organisations managers and assessors reflected very similar views to those given by their counterparts in public registered training organisations. The implementation of the Australian Quality Training Framework has raised the awareness of the need to monitor and evaluate RPL processes and decisions.

Support for assessment decision making

Generally assessors and managers in all registered training organisations included in the study considered that there was sufficient guidance in their training packages to support effective assessment of RPL. It was recognised however, that there may be variations from training package to training package.

Problems associated with the consistent interpretation of evidence, the difficulty of assessing underpinning knowledge requirements, and the need for support to translate documentation into useful language for clients were three issues raised by practitioners. One respondent suggested that 'training packages are full of jargon, repetitive, not clear and only a VET practitioner could work out what is required'. It was noted however that the new versions of training packages provided

better information. A number of registered training organisations have developed packages for assessors that have overcome some of the interpretation problems.

Strategies to improve the assessment process

Strategies nominated by assessors and managers for improving assessment included:

- ❖ taking time to consult with other assessors
- ❖ workshops
- ❖ scrutiny of processes
- ❖ training/retraining of assessors
- ❖ collaborative assessment and decision making
- ❖ internal moderation activities
- ❖ provision of exemplar assessment information, evidence or benchmark materials.

The assessment process

Assessment processes need improvement and we are working on that now. We have to ensure that assessors are performing well, their work needs to be backed up by managers, supervisors and work colleagues. This is particularly true as most of our assessors are in the workplace.

Assessment-only registered training organisation

Availability of skilled assessors

A small number of public and private registered training organisations commented that one of the problems they encountered with the process was the lack of assessors with the skills to make judgements about evidence drawn from often wide-ranging experiences and industry contexts.

The issue of the skills of assessors conducting RPL was one which was consistently raised by people involved in the RPL policy engagement forum. The discussion revolved around, firstly, the technical assessment skills of the people making the decisions, and secondly, around their ability to make decisions based on evidence drawn from a range of different contexts. Making judgements about competency on the diverse evidence provided in interviews and portfolios requires highly developed skills.

Concerns were raised by virtually all state training authorities regarding the quality of assessments that were being undertaken. The ability of assessors to undertake assessments using supplementary evidence and the lack of holistic assessment were considered issues in this area. Comments ranged from assessors 'over-assessing' to undertaking a 'tick-and-flick' process. This is in contrast to a large percentage of registered training organisation respondents who considered that they were compliant with the principles of assessment. There was also acknowledgement that there was always room for improvement especially in the areas of the consistency of interpretation of evidence, the sufficiency of evidence and the lack of verification in place. However the Australian Quality Training Framework has raised awareness of RPL and the need for quality assurance processes around this.

The involvement of industry in the recognition process was also seen to be of critical importance to valid assessment decision-making. RPL assessors needed clear advice on evidence requirements and this needed to be informed by industry technical expertise. It was suggested that industry was keen to establish assessor networks to disseminate current industry opinion or advice about sufficiency,

reliability and indicative evidence to limit the inconsistencies in assessment judgements, so that industry could feel more confident about the outcomes of recognition.

Industry confidence in the outcomes of assessment depends on technical input into the development and continuous improvement of evidence guides used by assessors.

However, everyone associated with this study concurred that the points they were making in relation to the assessment of RPL were, in fact, applicable to all assessment within VET. Professional development and resource support for assessors were seen to be essential for improved assessment practice, as was consideration of RPL in the revised Training Package for Assessment and Workplace Training.

Monitoring, evaluation and audit

STA perspective

All state and territory training authorities indicated that auditing of the Australian Quality Training Framework standards for registered training organisations was well underway, although a number of jurisdictions indicated that it was too early to make definitive statements about the standards' implementation.

Most authorities indicated that including RPL within the the framework's standards enabled it to be audited and that it also facilitated understanding of RPL. In general Standard 8 is considered one of the 'high risk' standards and as such has been a focus of audits in a number of states and territories. None of the state training authorities, however, saw a need for separate validation strategies for RPL. This can be aligned with the notion that it is a form of assessment.

Registered training organisations' perspective

The audit history of public and private registered training organisations included in the study appears in the following table. Although a relatively high proportion of managers and assessors indicated that their registered training organisations has developed strategies to monitor RPL, it is likely that in many of these instances the informants are actually talking about their registered training organisation having in place strategies to meet the Australian Quality Training Framework Standard 8.2.

Table 4: Registered training organisation audit practices

	Public providers (%)	Private providers (%)
Audited in the last two years	76.5	86.3
Audit covered RPL	58.8	77.0
Developed own strategies for monitoring RPL – managers	88.2	77.7
Developed own strategies for monitoring RPL – assessors	75.8	76.9

A significant number of registered training organisations do have RPL validation processes in place and therefore quality reviews of RPL assessment processes and decisions are being made. In private providers strategies included staff training and monitoring, internal auditing as well as staff assisting each other.

Over half (52.9%) of the managers of public providers indicated that there are ways in which their monitoring and evaluating of RPL can be improved. One comment was that there needed to be a clearer and more consistent policy nationally in relation to the monitoring and evaluation of RPL processes and judgements. In private providers, 77.7% of managers said that their registered training organisation's monitoring and evaluation of RPL did not need to be improved.

Within public providers a considerable number of managers (64.7%) and assessors (45.5%) indicated that there are other requirements in the Australian Quality Training Framework which impact on how they conduct RPL assessments. Some of these are demands of record keeping and the storage of evidence and other documentation. One manager commented that 'the new RPL standards have caused us to tighten procedures in order that we conform'. In the private providers only 22.2% of managers and 38.5% of assessors considered there were other requirements that impacted on their RPL assessments, whilst 77.7% of managers and 38.5% of assessors disagreed. Areas for improvement included: more documentation and details on the record sheets as well as a focus on access and equity to meet access and equity requirements of Australian Quality Training Framework Standard 6 (see equity considerations section of this report).

Industry perspectives

Input into this project was sought from a range of industry training advisory boards and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Broadly, they were asked to comment on the ways in which recognition of prior learning was promoted within the industries and businesses that comprised their constituencies; the factors that they thought were essential for the recognition process to work in those industries; the major barriers to its implementation; and what might need to be changed for recognition to be more widely accepted.

In summary, their responses can be distilled to three key observations, following on from one central one—that 'recognition' is a form of assessment:

- ◇ Assessors must be trained to conduct it, and resources must be developed to support the process.
- ◇ Industry experts must have input to determining what is considered acceptable evidence.
- ◇ Collecting and maintaining evidence of skills development should be regarded as a skill in itself. Its importance throughout a person's working life must be promoted.

Some informants thought that industry must more actively support the evidence-gathering process. However, others pointed out that the benefits of skills recognition were felt by individuals and the whole of society, not just by the industry or specific workplace of current employment. Thus some employers considered they were being asked to support an activity that was only partially or directly of benefit to themselves. Much of industry focused on training rather than on recognition, and in many instances, there was a preference to invest in training activity (which was better understood) than in assessment-only (where the complexity, and hence, cost, of the process was not clear to those who were being asked to pay for it.) It was agreed that if the advantages of recognition were better promoted, there would be less reluctance by employers.

It is considered important that the benefits of recognition are not achieved at the price of quality in training and assessment and it is apparent that, in industry, issues with recognition are but a part of larger concerns with training and assessment as a whole. In fact, while some see a need for treating RPL as a separate activity, others do not differentiate: 'It's just assessment. It should be treated as such'.

Enterprise registered training organisations' perspectives

Enterprise registered training organisations were defined within this project as being organisations whose core business was not training and assessment for VET recognition. However, these organisations had registered training organisations status for the purposes of training and recognising their personnel's skills and knowledge.

The eight enterprise registered training organisations who provided their perspectives on RPL were delivering, as would be expected, a wide range of training packages in areas specific to their enterprises. Some of them are also engaged in the delivery of Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training and other training packages that broadly supported the administrative functions of their organisations—Business Services and Frontline Management Initiative (FMI), for example.

For about half of these organisations, training was linked to the enterprise bargaining agreements of some sections if not all of their staff.

RPL promotion and client awareness

Most enterprise registered training organisations have active policies of promoting RPL and have given some thought to the ways in which they could do more for their disadvantaged learners. (Strategies include allowing more time for applicants from non-English-speaking backgrounds and those with a disability; talking it through with an assessor; working to compensate for the difficult language—including the VET jargon; and using alternative promotional strategies rather than relying on printed materials.)

RPL processes

All have a range of processes and strategies in place designed to support learners from the outset of the RPL process. These are no different to those put in place by other providers: it is typical to offer information sessions, to publish information in handbooks and brochures, and to inform employees about the process in one-on-one interviews.

For some enterprise registered training organisations, the recognition process is fundamental to an organisational interest in having the skills of their employees recognised and certified. One enterprise registered training organisation had a long history of offering non-accredited training to its employees, which was all on record. At about the same time as training packages were introduced, the organisation was privatised, and hence saw it as timely to formalise and recognise the training their staff had already undertaken. For them, the recognition process involves a substantial exercise of bringing certain staff off-line to undertake training that supports them in the evidence gathering process. Once employees have amassed the evidence, they can then receive recognition for current competencies, and at the same time, any skills gaps and areas for future training can be identified. In other words, the recognition process here is integral to an overall training strategy. In another enterprise registered training organisation, 50% of all course completions are achieved via recognition.

In order to ensure that the evidence submitted is reliable, the enterprise registered training organisations interviewed rely heavily on the quality of the handouts with guidelines they provide to their learners and on the support provided by their instructors.

Like other providers, enterprise registered training organisations ensure consistency among their assessors by encouraging validation processes and the establishment of benchmarks. Almost all agree that they have put monitoring strategies in place by, for example, insisting on collaborative decision-making, and review of all assessment decisions, especially where 'not yet competent' decisions were made. Although mindful of the requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework, it is seen as a driver that is equalled in importance by the demands of industry and the desire to acknowledge the existing skills of workers.

All of the enterprise registered training organisations are confident that their assessments are valid, reliable, fair and flexible.

They are divided as to how helpful training packages and other curriculum tend to be in relation to providing guidance on RPL, although of course this varies from one training package to another.

The lessons which the enterprise registered training organisations identify include the:

- ♦ importance of informing people early, rather than well into the training program
- ♦ importance of consistency

- ◇ value of regular meetings for assessors at which they can share assessment tools and other resources
- ◇ necessity of reviewing their recognition and other assessment processes.

Industry's perspective is that the two key parties to the recognition process are the assessor and the candidate. Informants say that both need to be supported in the process—the assessor by having access to training and ongoing professional development, and the candidate by having access to clear guidelines and support in the preparation of evidence. Some note that evidence collection poses particular difficulties for those unaccustomed to VET (and its jargon) and that a key group to whom this applies are those workers whose past unhappy experiences with education may make them resistant to all sorts of training and assessment activity. The recognition process could be seen as too academic a process for these candidates. Indeed, not only candidates, but also some employers see there being no value in 'qualifications for qualifications' sake'.

RPL applicability

Enterprises tend to be quite clear about those areas in which their employees cannot receive recognition—typically safety-related competencies. These are areas of their operations in which internal policy effectively 'over-rides' their obligation to offer RPL, and they make no apologies for this. As one trainer/assessor put it, in relation to these off-limits areas: 'We put RPL on the table, and then we take it away again'. For some enterprise registered training organisations, these areas are also the ones on which their reputation for quality (and perhaps, market edge) rests.

Some enterprise registered training organisations decide that cultural change within the workplace is best effected via training, and in these instances they will also choose not to offer the RPL pathway. For example, one enterprise registered training organisation is running a program dealing with working in a culturally diverse workplace, and all employees are expected to participate.

In addition, informants think that workers on low wages are sometimes not highly motivated to embark on a recognition process that offers no foreseeable wage increase as an outcome. One informant, reflecting on the complexity of the RPL process, recommended that: 'Registered training organisations need to remove their own barriers before working with industry'.

RPL uptake

Enterprises tend to be satisfied with the level of applications for recognition of prior learning they are receiving from learners embarking on the higher level qualifications, but some feel that the numbers applying are still too low. Just as in public provision, some applicants in enterprise registered training organisations would be deterred by their lack of understanding of what is required or their inability to map their prior learning against the competencies in question. The enterprise registered training organisations are evenly divided as to whether or not higher level qualifications are likely to receive more applications, but agree that where that is the case, it is likely to be due to applicants' work being more likely to have been documented, or to lend itself to the production of hard-copy evidence.

It was also noted that recognition activity which is funded and facilitated by industry is not reported on because it is not government funded.

Industry support for RPL

Jenny demonstrated great enthusiasm for recent initiatives by the Queensland Department of Families towards providing training and encouraging fast tracking through the use of RPL. In November 2001 the department had introduced a Memorandum of Understanding to support training in childcare for the next three years in Queensland. The department would provide financial assistance to support existing workers in the childcare industry to gain qualifications at certificate III and diploma level. The department would also provide support for those who undertook the RPL process.

Jenny indicated that this moved RPL into an exciting and innovative phase of development. Whereas previously the RPL process had been somewhat ad hoc, suddenly there was 'full on' support and the first phase was a joint project to develop a candidate's guide that provided a base tool and useful guidelines for applicants. It also served to encourage their confidence, which had previously been lacking.

The RPL processes managed by the team were designed to fit the flexible delivery mode and there was a huge commitment from the team to make it work. Jenny claims that the RPL process has helped to revitalise the childcare workforce and 'there have been a lot of joys for women who have been in the industry for 15 years or more. There was a definite culture change in their attitude to training and they began to initiate tutorial groups and support each other with the development of assessment materials'.

She also observed that the team of RPL assessors gained significant strengths in their abilities and were able to give direction and advice to managers about appropriate strategies to improve the process.

RPL in the national data collection standard

The national provider data collection standard, known as the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS), distinguishes between RPL (an assessment) and credit transfer (an administrative process).

Recognition of prior learning is based on evidence which confirms that the student already has the required knowledge and skills, involving an assessment or some other form of evaluation of the student's knowledge and skills gained through work and life experience against the national competency standards.

AVETMISS – the provider national data reporting standard

Recognition of prior learning

This is an outcome where the client has been assessed as competent for the whole unit of competency or module by a trainer. The result of the assessment is on the basis of the client's prior skills and knowledge acquired through previous training, work or life experience.

Credit transfer

This code is applied to a unit of competency or module when a client presents a recognised credential from the same or another institution or training organisation for credit. Programs of training are granted credit transfer through prior arrangement between educational organisations. Therefore a credit transfer is essentially an administrative process.

AVETMISS Release 4.0 September (NCVER 2001)

The RPL statistics in the national provider collection cover recognition of prior learning that occurs upon enrolment. That RPL should be an opportunity available to students 'before' tuition actually starts is also implicit in the Australian Quality Training Framework notion of RPL. As has been explained in the previous sections there is more to RPL than occurs on enrolment. Thus the national statistics present *lower-bound* estimates of the level of RPL activity and assist with identifying where RPL is more likely to occur.

RPL uptake

Australian VET policy regards recognition of prior learning as an intrinsic function of a sustainable and equitable post-compulsory education and training system. Here we compare empiric data with perceptions on the quantum of RPL occurring and its applicability to various students and training programs. Qualitative information collected during the course of this project allows consideration of registered training organisations' views on RPL demand and uptake.

Statistics from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research's national provider data collection,³ governed by the AVETMIS Standard, show clearly that RPL activity is low overall but also that it apparently does not apply equally to all programs, students, industries and contexts. The statistics for 1995 to 2001 indicate that RPL mainly occurs among TAFE and other government providers and among older students who are enrolled in programs that can lead to a recognised qualification. RPL activity in the private sector registered training organisations is lower but has grown much more rapidly from 0.9% of students with RPL in 1996 to 3% in 2001. Similarly, the incidence of RPL in the community provider sector has also begun to grow rapidly but from a low base of 0.1% in 1996 to 0.6% in 2001.

Overall uptake of RPL

Reported

Overall, the number of students (figure 1 in the appendix) with one or more subjects gained through RPL as a proportion of the total grew during the period 1995 to 2001, from 2.4% in 1995 to around 4.0% in 2001.

Actual numbers of students with one or more RPL subjects increased consistently, from 30 000 in 1995 to 66 400 in 2001.

Perceptions

As part of this research, both managers and assessors in public and private providers were asked to give their *impression* as to whether the numbers applying for recognition were too high, about right or too low. As can be seen in the following table, the majority of respondents indicated that the uptake of RPL is about right. However, significant numbers of providers suggested RPL student numbers were too low.

Virtually all state and territory training authorities indicated that they considered the reported uptake of RPL as being lower than desired, although the uptake across jurisdictions varied extensively. Thus, the data and individual perceptions suggest the trend is likely to be towards more RPL in the future.

³ Analysed more fully in the appendix.

Table 5: Provider perceptions about uptake of RPL

	Public providers (%)	Private providers (%)
Too high	6	15
About right	54	73
Too low	28	31

Note: Figures do not add to 100 because multiple responses were allowed

Applicability across Australian Qualifications Framework levels

Reported

AVETMISS data indicate that the incidence of RPL rises with higher qualification levels in the Australian Qualifications Framework (figure 2 in the appendix).

Of diploma and higher-level students, 10.6% in 1999 and 9.7% in 2000 had RPL. The rates are also well above average for students in certificate III and IV programs. For students in Australian Qualifications Framework certificate I or II programs the corresponding proportions are 2.5% and 2.3%. RPL uptake is negligible among students enrolled in non-award and subject-only programs, and programs leading to a recognised qualification outside the Australian Qualifications Framework.

Perceptions

As part of this research, both managers and assessors in public and private providers were asked to give their impression as to whether RPL was more applicable to some levels of the Australian Qualifications Framework than for others.

Table 6: Provider perceptions about applicability of RPL across Australian Qualifications Framework levels

	Public providers (%)	Private providers (%)
More applicable to some AQF levels	46	58
Equally applicable across all AQF levels	39	3

Note: Figures do not add to 100 because multiple responses were allowed

Some indicated that RPL was more applicable to certificates I to III, with one commenting that it was '... easier to demonstrate competency at that level than at diploma level because the evidence requirements are less complex'. Others suggested that certificate III to advanced diploma were the levels at which RPL was more applicable. These higher levels lend themselves more to recognition because more of the applicants may have broader life experiences. Respondents indicated that higher-level activity was likely to be more prevalent as applicants were likely to have more confidence, skills and experience. Where there was a higher incidence of RPL activity in the lower Australian Qualifications Framework levels it is suggested that this may be in relation to 'nested' qualifications. Clearly, providers' views can influence to whom they promote RPL and thus affect RPL levels of uptake.

Variance across age

Reported

A student's age was found to have an important bearing on the likelihood of having RPL (table 14 in the appendix).

The rate for young people up to 19 years of age is lower than for older students, in the range 2.5% to 2.6% from 1997 to 2000, in contrast to an overall rate in the range 3.6% to 4.0% in these years.

The incidence of RPL is greatest for prime working age students, in the 20 to 24 and 25 to 39 age groups (in the range 4.6% to 5.1% from 1997 to 2000). This is followed by older students, aged 40 to 64 years, where the rate has been consistently close to the overall rate of 4%. The rate for young people up to 19 years of age is lower than for older students, in the range 2.5% to 2.6% from 1997 to 2000.

Subjects that attract RPL applicants

Reported

The incidence of RPL varies considerably across fields of study (table 15 in the appendix). The rate of RPL is close to or higher than the overall rate of 4.0% for all fields of study except VET multi-field education and ranges from 1.5% for VET multi-field education programs to 12.5% for veterinary science and animal care programs.

The very different pattern for VET multi-field education is a consequence of the fact that this field of study includes many general education and preparatory courses. These courses fall outside the Australian Qualifications Framework and are often taken by young people who are less likely to have previous education or training, or equivalent experiences, which would entitle them to RPL. Thus Australian Qualifications Framework and age play a role in the incidence of RPL across field of study.

Perceptions

Within public registered training organisations approximately 66% of assessors suggested that there are areas that attract more applicants. The areas noted as attracting more applicants were generic or common competencies such as communication, supervisory, computer and presenting information skills. In other words people with broad industry and life experience are seeking recognition for generic competencies they have developed over the years. Two areas nominated were aged care and disability services where there are existing skilled workers with no qualifications. Within private providers generally the focus of RPL activity is on existing workers, such as those in business administration and hospitality. Again, applicants commonly seek recognition for their communication skills.

Table 7: Provider perceptions about subjects that attract RPL applicants

That there are subjects that attract more RPL applicants	Public providers (%)	Private providers (%)
Agreed	66	69
Disagreed	3	15
Did not know	24	15

Note: Figures do not add to 100 because multiple responses were allowed

Equity considerations

Reported

RPL uptake among students in various access and equity groups are mixed and in many cases are lower than among students overall (table 16 in the appendix):

- ♦ Indigenous students are much less likely to obtain RPL (in 1999, 1.9% in contrast to 4.0%, in 2000, 2.1% in contrast to 3.7% and in 2001, 2.1% in contrast to 3.8%).

- ✧ Students with a reported disability are slightly less likely to have RPL than students without a reported disability (in 2001, 3.1% and 3.7% respectively).
- ✧ Students from a non-English-speaking background are about equally likely to obtain RPL as all other students (3.7% compared with 3.9% in 2001).

Perceptions

Within public providers, assessors were asked to identify whether equity groups make use of RPL in the same proportion as other applicants. Of these assessors, 57% suggested that those who are disadvantaged make less use of recognition, while 21% considered that their use was about the same as for other students. In contrast, 46% of private providers considered that the use of RPL by students who are disadvantaged was about the same and only 15% thought that they made less use of RPL.

Many assessors commented that disadvantaged students lacked the confidence to apply for RPL. Further, they were much less likely to seek support or even have an awareness that the process exists. The main groups identified as needing support through the RPL process were mature women returning to the workforce and applicants from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Even in instances where potential applicants were provided with quality information, it was suggested that there was a gap in the RPL process between information dissemination and the ultimate decision being made about the granting of recognition. This gap was where the support structures needed to be put in place to ensure that disadvantaged applicants would then proceed with their application.

The participants in the policy engagement forum were asked to address the questions: Do people from equity groups have ready access to your services? If not, how can access be improved? In response, they were concerned to broaden the membership of the conventionally understood equity groups to include people of diverse backgrounds who are disadvantaged by their location, their gender, their ethnicity, their age, and their income level. This broader membership should also include those with no previous experience of training or non-academic learners, who might not perceive themselves as likely participants in the training market.

As identified by public and private provider registered training organisations, policy engagement forum participants commented on the fact that members of equity groups were more likely to participate in training rather than seek recognition of their existing skills. They themselves identified other benefits (such as the social dimension) as outweighing the benefits to be gained by RPL. They preferred to participate as a group because of the supportive environment, and their training generally was seen as a stepping-off point, and a strategy for building confidence.

One participant summarised the potential barriers to RPL that all applicant's face, and suggested that these are compounded for those who fall into equity groups. By its nature, RPL requires applicants to have a range of skills in order to be able to access the process. It requires an understanding of the training environment, and of RPL and how to access it. It requires the skills to interpret information in order to determine eligibility for recognition. It requires the identification and collection of relevant evidence. It requires formal application, generally in documentary form. It requires organisation of evidence in a coherent form and/or presentation in an interview situation.

Strategies for improving access for disadvantaged groups

Within both public and private registered training organisations, many managers and assessors considered more could be done to assist applicants from disadvantaged groups using RPL. The solutions put forward by participants in the policy engagement forum were similar to those offered

by public and private registered training organisations. Overall, however, access and equity groups were considered to be facing similar barriers to others regarding making use of RPL. There were suggestions that greater collaboration between assessors, the community and equity support personnel would enhance possible uptake by disadvantaged learners, as would the use of group processes.

A range of options for improving the quality of the support for all of those applicants who may be deemed 'disadvantaged' are outlined below.

Areas for improvement	Possible actions
Promotion of RPL	Conduct targeted marketing. Make links with community-based organisations to disseminate information. Actively 'sell' the advantages to the clients.
Process improvement	Make process simpler, less threatening and as user-friendly as possible.
Enhanced communication strategies	Use plain English in written materials. Use oral communication methods to reduce the reliance on written documentation. Offer an online option for remote applicants.
Support for applicants	Provide opportunities for access to pre-interview processes. Provide access to disability consultants or counsellors. Coach candidates for process. Allow mentors or support people to be involved. Provide more encouragement. Provide specific support e.g. language, literacy and numeracy.
Support for assessors	Provide staff with the skills to assist with recognition for disadvantaged applicants, including language and literacy. Utilise assessors and key support people in teams to support the recognition assessment process. Provide clearer strategies for dealing with overseas experience/qualifications. Provide resources such as assessment kits.

What the national RPL data does not capture

In theory, an RPL situation requires students to have sufficient understanding of their own knowledge and skills to be aware that they may be eligible for RPL, which in turn requires a degree of self-assessment by the learner and some understanding of the requirements which must be met for the subject.

In practice, of course, learners do not necessarily have a sophisticated understanding of their existing knowledge and skills and/or of subject requirements. Consequently, situations can arise where learners, or their teachers, become aware of the possible eligibility for RPL only after tuition has begun. If, after a small amount of tuition, the learner then applies successfully for RPL, should this be regarded as RPL or not?

The spirit of the Australian Quality Training Framework suggests that the situation just described should be regarded as RPL, since there is no suggestion that the required knowledge and skills resulted from the tuition and the stated rationale for RPL would still be met. On the other hand, any tuition, or indeed any assessment, will alter a learner's knowledge and skills (Ahmed & Pollitt 2002), usually positively. Once this happens, it becomes extremely difficult to determine whether the learner previously met the requirements for up-front RPL, and determining whether there was an entitlement which predated tuition would seem a pointless exercise anyway.

Thus, to date, recognition of prior learning reported in the national data collection is upon enrolment RPL only and provides a lower-bound only estimate of the total RPL effort.

The RPL definition in the AVETMIS Standard does not capture:

- ❖ Information about 'partial RPL' situations, such as the granting of RPL for units or elements of competency which form part of a larger unit of delivery.
- ❖ The situation where a learner is granted RPL after tuition in the subject has begun and this is reported as a pass. Previous work undertaken by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (unpublished) indicates that, in practice, the distinction between RPL and an enrolment leading to an assessment and a pass is not clear-cut. Policy engagement forum participants and registered training organisation interview respondents also offered numerous instances whereby RPL strategies were reported as a subject 'pass' rather than an RPL on AVETMISS. Learners opt for RPL after they have enrolled in the course, because they recognise the value in fast-tracking once they have a clearer understanding of the requirements for the subject. Information gathered during the course of this project indicated that 36% of students applied for RPL during the course of training while 64% of students had applied for recognition before enrolling in their program.
- ❖ Unsuccessful RPL applications. Another issue raised by a number of informants to this research was that the data only reflect *successful* RPL outcomes, and not the full extent of students who apply for RPL activity.
- ❖ Learners who opt for tuition even when they are entitled to RPL, because they value the learning experience.
- ❖ Also missing from the data are recognition of prior learning (or recognition of current competencies) conducted within firms and industries at private expense and not involving a TAFE provider.

The research undertaken for this project suggests that all these scenarios arise in practice, but none is dominant.

State training authority perceptions on variations in RPL uptake

The reasons for RPL uptake variations cited by state training authority representatives, and as discussed and confirmed in further detail throughout this report, were:

- ❖ reporting of RPL not consistent across registered training organisations and jurisdictions
- ❖ varying costings, resourcing models, culture (perception) of the registered training organisations and industries
- ❖ varying interpretations and applications of the following definitions: RPL and credit transfer
- ❖ varying interpretations of RPL along the skills recognition–training continuum such as: fast tracking, flexible assessment and early assessment, that affect related reporting on AVETMISS
- ❖ greater activity in the higher levels of the Australian Qualifications Framework.

The impact of resourcing and costing arrangements on RPL uptake

The various state and territory training authorities and representatives at the policy engagement forum considered funding of RPL an important consideration affecting RPL activity. Many noted the variations in funding models as possibly linked with disparity of RPL activity across states and territories as well as across provider groups (that is, public and private providers).

Reported

How RPL is funded is summarised in table 9 at the end of this section. As the table shows, RPL is resourced in two major ways: via state or territory funding to registered training organisations and by clients (candidates and/or enterprises) who are charged fees by registered training organisations for the recognition service.

At the national level a formula is used for counting RPL for the purposes of the ANTA annual training hours profiles agreement. This formula counts RPL-related hours at a rate significantly less than hours of the training program itself and up to a maximum of 10 hours for each module/unit of competency. State training authorities resource registered training organisations for RPL, either at the same rate as the training program itself or at a rate less than the equivalent training hours. Some fund in the same manner across all programs and provider types, others have a mix of funding models.

In jurisdictions where RPL is resourced across all programs at the same rate as the training program itself (Western Australia, Tasmania and Northern Territory), the reported RPL activity is quite disparate. Two of the three jurisdictions that fully resource RPL across all programs are below the national average while the third is well above the national average (this relates to state average percentage of RPL to total annual hour activity).

As well as the various RPL funding arrangements that each state and territory has with their registered training organisations, the registered training organisations in turn have various RPL fees and charging arrangements with their clients, as outlined in table 10. Registered training organisations' charges to clients range from no costs to what the market will bear as a full fee-for-service arrangement. These charges may vary across their funding codes or sources as well as across type of VET program, thereby making it difficult to analyse easily and arrive at definitive conclusions as to how variations in resourcing and costing models affect the reported uptake of RPL. Further work is needed in this area. What can be confirmed is that there is much RPL activity that is being 'paid for' by clients, as is shown in table 8.

Table 8: Vocational training delivery by funding source and outcomes for Australia, 2001

	Govt recurrent VET funding	Govt- specific VET funding	Fee for service	Overseas full fee- paying students	All funding sources	Total RPL
RPL module enrolments	82.1%	1.3%	15.1%	1.4%	100%	332 092
RPL annual hours	79.0%	1.2%	18.1%	1.7%	100%	9 775 366
All module enrolment	10 460 927	1 255 904	1 497 501	276 993	13 491 325	
All annual hours	301 373 055	30 574 989	34 458 136	11 229 820	377 636 000	

Source: NCVER 2001 unpublished data

About 80% of all RPL is linked with mainstream government-funded VET programs. A number of participants at the policy engagement forum suggested that the 'shortfall' between government-funded programs for RPL and the 'true cost' of RPL was funded by the registered training organisation or the candidate.

Fee-for-service RPL accounts for a further 15% to 18% of all RPL. In this funding source candidates and/or their employers are paying for RPL. The level of funding for full fee-paying overseas students indicates that overseas students' RPL activity is very low at around 1.5% of all RPL. This may indicate the compliance requirement of the *Educational Services for Overseas Students Act 2000* in regards to the provision of RPL and a requirement for registered training organisations to ensure that overseas students have a full-time load.

Clearly it has been beyond the ability of this project to analyse sufficiently the influence of resourcing and costing arrangements on RPL uptake. A valuable start has been made, however, by

collating the information in table 9, which previously had not been so assembled. What can be said is that funding RPL at rates less than for training itself can act as a disincentive to registered training organisations offering RPL. It also can give the impression that the RPL pathway does not yield equivalent outcomes to the training program itself.

Table 9: State/territory funding policy and practices

State/territory	Definition	Approach	Resourcing	Fees and charges	Initiatives
Australian Capital Territory	AQTF definition applies	RPL is considered just another form of assessment which should be as rigorous and an effective part of the training cycle.	RPL is fully funded with TAFE provider. User choice programs have \$200 included per qualification to undertake RPL. Other programs such as industry training programs fund up to 50% of the cost of the program for RPL.	The TAFE or private providers determine charges for RPL.	Since the introduction of AQTF no policies or guidelines are in place other than that which is in performance or funding agreements.
New South Wales ⁴	AQTF definition applies but note that RPL is considered to be a more inclusive and overarching term than that which is defined within this project.	RTOs in NSW are required to offer RPL as part of their compliance with AQTF requirements for organisations. TAFE NSW considers RPL to be both a customer service and equity entitlement.	TAFE is not fully funded for RPL for ASCH (01 funding). RPL is funded at a 'discount rate' and targets are set. Penalties apply if targets are not met. For user choice programs \$400 is added to the contract to cover cost of RPL. For other contracted training RPL is not funded.	In TAFEs, there is no charge for RPL as such; however, a fixed administration fee is charged. In commercial services a fee of \$1 per module/unit hour is also charged. ⁵ In apprenticeship programs (TAFE and private providers) the administration fee is the only charge to students. In traineeships no administration fee is applied.	There is no DET policy and the AQTF requirements apply. TAFE NSW has a recognition policy that covers: - pre-arranged RPL⁶ - RPL - TAFE NSW credit transfer - mutual recognition
Northern Territory	AQTF definition applies	RPL is considered a legitimate process and not differentiated from training. It is the qualification that is funded not the process.	Those VET providers who are resourced are provided with the resources for the qualification regardless of the pathway. In user choice programs existing workers are not funded for RPL unless the employer pays for RPL for the first AQF level.	Public and private providers may determine charges for RPL.	Still in effect are the 'RPL funding guidelines' which were developed prior to the AQTF. NTETA does not have an RPL policy on the operation of RPL.

⁴ At point of publication not all relevant sections of the NSW authority had confirmed this overview as accurately reflecting their approach.

⁵ The \$1 per hour is based on the normal duration (in hours) for the delivery of a particular module or unit, not the time taken to perform the RPL.

⁶ Pre-arranged RPL is when an assessment of previous learning has occurred and then arrangements are established within the training organisation to streamline the recognition process. While it is statistically relevant to this project in terms of data collected under AVEITMISS, it was excluded from the consultations, as it is not an RPL process consistent with the agreed definition for this research project.

State/territory	Definition	Approach	Resourcing	Fees and charges	Initiatives
Queensland	AQTF definition applies	RPL is an assessment process and as such the focus should be, and is, on quality assessments (which includes validity, reliability, flexibility and fairness).	TAFEs are funded the full nominal hours for RPL. However, in user choice programs both TAFEs and private providers are funded at 30% of the nominal hours.	TAFEs and private providers currently charge up to \$1.10 per nominal hour RPL fee for government-funded programs. The State Training Authority does not prescribe fees or charges for fee-for-service activities.	An RPL policy was included as part of the guidelines developed prior to the AQTF, regarding 'How to become an RTO'. Providers are now referred to the AQTF Standards and the Guide 3: Recognition resource (DETYA/ANTA 2001).
South Australia	AQTF definition applies.	RPL is considered a form of assessment that requires a different emphasis to 'course-based' assessment and should include risk management, holistic approaches and validation through appropriate third party reports.	Under its purchase agreement TAFEs are granted the full nominal hour value for RPL. Under user choice RPL is funded at the funding price for both TAFE and private providers. There is no funding of existing workers within user choice or contracted training.	Under the purchase agreement TAFEs are allowed to charge clients 50% of the delivery fee for RPL. In fee-for-service programs TAFE is entitled to determine its own pricing structure for RPL. Under user choice both TAFE and private RTOs are entitled to charge up to \$1 per nominal hour for the duration of the qualification. This is optional and this charge may not necessarily be applied for RPL.	Accreditation and Registration Council Guidelines for RTOs includes advice regarding RPL.
Tasmania	AQTF definition applies	RPL is considered a form or subset of assessment and produces quality outcomes for the client. The purchasing model should not disadvantage those with prior skills. To differentiate would produce negative attitudes when undertaking training by discouraging RPL.	The funding model does not differentiate between RPL and other outcome codes. RPL is funded according to nominal hours.	There are no guidelines related to fees and charges.	Since the introduction of the AQTF no policies or guidelines are in place other than that which is in performance or funding agreements.

State/territory	Definition	Approach	Resourcing	Fees and charges	Initiatives
Victoria	AQTF definition applies	RPL is considered a legitimate learning and assessment process. RPL is a time consuming process for education administration and assessment that includes providing a framework and support for the client.	In TAFE and ACE providers there is no differentiation between delivery as RPL, classroom, workplace etc. With private providers user choice programs are funded according to the time taken to undertake the RPL assessment. With other tendered training, RPL is not resourced.	TAFE, ACE and private providers may charge no more than the actual cost of assessment of RPL for the purposes of the course	No policies or guidelines exist; however, the approach to RPL is expressed in AQTF Standard 8.2 performance & funding agreements, ESOS Act
Western Australia	RPL is viewed as a subset of the broader term 'skills recognition'. Skills recognition ⁷ encompasses: ❖ RPL ❖ RCC ❖ credit transfer ❖ RPL for entry ❖ overseas equivalence.	For RPL to be conducted well requires a considerable amount of effort and support by the provider, often on a one-to-one basis. RPL is to be encouraged and providers need to change their approach to providing RPL.	RPL is funded at the standard rate applicable to the funding agreement for the full nominal hour for all programs in both TAFE institutes and private providers.	For publicly funded providers RPL or skills recognition is set at the same rate as the subsidised tuition fees rate. There is provision for the TAFEs to provide some skills recognition on a fee-for-service basis; but this cannot be on profile. The department has no capacity to regulate the fees charged by private providers. The only time this is possible is when a private RTO is in receipt of public funds.	Skills Recognition Framework for VET in Western Australia (2002) has been updated in line with the AQTF. Marketing campaign has recently been undertaken to raise client awareness and increase uptake of RPL. Campaign data indicated that RPL has almost doubled.

⁷ RPL, RCC and RPL for entry apply to this research project.

RPL implementation and requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework

In this chapter we discuss each of the identified key issues associated with RPL implementation and registered training organisation compliance with the Australian Quality Training Framework standards. Suggestions are included on how the National Training Quality Council might best support more and effective implementation of recognition of prior learning.

Promotion of RPL

Standards 6.3 and 8.2a require registered training organisations to provide information pertaining to RPL prior to enrolment and the registered training organisation must ensure that the process is offered to all applicants on enrolment. In general, state training authority representatives considered that it was relatively easy for registered training organisations to comply with Australian Quality Training Framework Standards 6.3 & 8.2a although at least one state considered that the quality of information provided to clients was poor.

All registered training organisations included in this study have initiated broad-ranging dissemination strategies to inform clients about RPL prior to, and on enrolment. Promotion of RPL to assessors was also occurring within the majority of the organisations included in this research. Assessors were being provided with guidelines and strategies for the conduct of the recognition process.

Students acknowledged that the information they had received provided a general overview of RPL, details of costs, guidelines for collecting evidence and particulars about the application process. However, more attention to information sharing on RPL via introductory workshop sessions might help as many indicated their primary source of information on the recognition process was word of mouth.

There was no consensus across the jurisdictions regarding the proactive promotion of RPL. Some jurisdictions considered that marketing RPL was in fact a cause of a number of issues surrounding the recognition process. They felt that raising its profile created the notion that RPL was different from assessment and therefore needed separate processes in place. It was strongly proposed by at least one state training authority that marketing to registered training organisations should focus on assessment *per se* rather than on RPL alone.

Language and definition of RPL

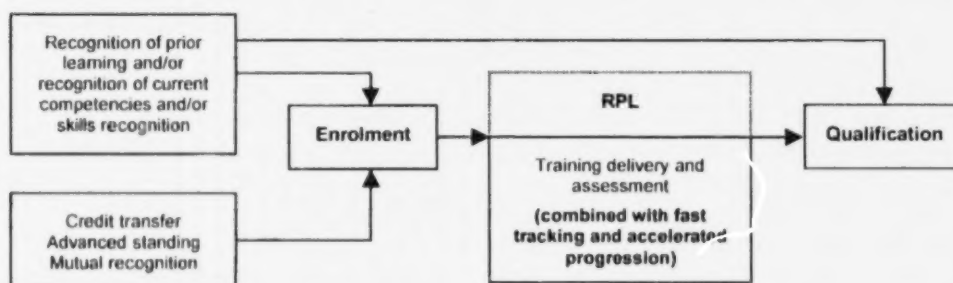
Most state and territory training authorities have broadly adopted the Australian Quality Training Framework definition of RPL but many considered RPL, credit transfer and mutual recognition to be different aspects of recognition. How the forms of recognition fit within the Australian Quality Training Framework and the provision of training and assessment was often unclear, even confused. To assist practitioners in interpretation it should be clear whether RPL under the

requirements of the framework's standards for registered training organisations includes or excludes credit transfer and mutual recognition.

In addition, a small number of state and territory training authorities emphasised that the separation of RPL (8.2) from the assessment standard (8.1) reinforced the notion that RPL was different from assessment. This was considered problematic and created the impression that a different assessment model was required which in practice tended to be cumbersome and bureaucratic. RPL assessments are conducted under the assessment principles embedded in Standard 8.1 and hence should not be separated.

The notion of offering RPL *prior* to enrolment was also noted by a number of states as promoting a false premise as they considered that assessment should be offered throughout the training cycle to facilitate progression. In a number of instances there was evidence of registered training organisations interpreting 'offering' RPL prior to enrolment to mean RPL has to be conducted prior to enrolment.

Interpretation of RPL is further confused when clients are offered, after tuition has begun, various opportunities for skills recognition through processes referred to as accelerated learning, early assessment, fast-tracking and challenge testing. A number of jurisdictions noted that strategies such as 'fast track' and 'early assessment' were more effective strategies for recognition than the traditional methodology of RPL assessment conducted up-front and prior to training. Clarity around where these forms of RPL/assessment sit within the AVETMISS definition and reporting requirements may assist more accurate reporting of flexible assessment strategies and a proportion of the 'hidden activity' to be captured, as represented by the shaded area in the following diagram.



In summary the National Quality Training Council should consider:

- ✧ Revising and clarifying the Australian Quality Training Framework definition of recognition of prior learning. Does the requirement that RPL be offered prior to enrolment mean it has to be *conducted* prior to enrolment, which is the common interpretation of the framework's RPL definition, or can it also occur early in the tuition phase? If the latter, then registered training organisations should be encouraged to refer to early assessments or fast track assessments as RPL to reduce confusion and alleviate business pressures at enrolment time.
- ✧ Referring any proposed revised definition of RPL in the Australian Quality Training Framework to the National Training Statistics Committee for consideration for use in the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard, against which national data is recorded; noting that capturing RPL that occurs early in the tuition phase as well as upon enrolment may not be successful unless some of the resourcing arrangements for RPL are altered simultaneously.
- ✧ Unambiguously confirm within the Australian Quality Training Framework that RPL is a form of assessment by incorporating RPL into the assessment Standard 8.1. This would clarify that RPL is different from the administrative processes of credit transfer and mutual recognition, and that RPL assessments are to be conducted under the assessment principles in Standard 8.1:

they do not require procedures that are different from other assessment and often more cumbersome and bureaucratic.

Finally, the full Australian Quality Training Framework definition of RPL is quite lengthy and encompasses both the interpretation of the term and also attempts to assist practitioners with guidance regarding appropriate forms of evidence. Advice regarding appropriate evidence could be excluded from the definition and presented in information material elsewhere.

Audit and registered training organisation compliance with the standards

Most authorities indicated that including RPL within the standards enabled it to be auditable and that it may also facilitate understanding of RPL. In general Standard 8 is considered one of the high risk standards and as such has been a focus of initial AQTF audits in a number of states and territories. In all instances authorities are not perceiving the need for separate validation strategies for RPL. This is clearly aligned with the notion that RPL is a form of assessment.

RPL processes

Standard 8.2b, which relates to information and support to applicants to gather evidence for RPL, was considered more problematic for auditors and state training authorities to review and judge on compliance. In essence it was considered a principle when providing RPL, but if audited needed to be taken in context. To determine compliance with this standard auditors required industry knowledge of acceptable processes and of the costs (in terms of time and fees) of undertaking RPL.

In terms of 'time', auditors are in essence asked to determine what is reasonable. In most instances auditors were either indicating compliance or offering observations for improvement. In addition, 8.2ii was considered similarly—as a principle. What constituted 'adequate information and support' was dependent on the target group and industry/training package context, often relying on a value judgement on the part of the auditor. Often material was generic rather than targeted to specific audiences and therefore it was difficult for auditors to determine compliance or non-compliance.

This notwithstanding, registered training organisations and RPL applicants both pointed to the need for improved support services, and thus it is suggested that the National Training Quality Council consider the following strategies:

- ❖ Encouraging improved and practical support services for both registered training organisations and the RPL applicant.
 - Assessment *per se* is a critical issue among registered training organisations and assessors need access to ongoing professional development and collaboration opportunities to validate and establish assessment benchmarks.
 - Also there are alternatives to the commonly used hard copy portfolio approach to obtaining evidence that need development and consideration by assessors. The candidate needs clear guidelines in plain English about the RPL evidence-gathering process and support in the collection of evidence. Existing RPL evidence guides and processes remain too academic and jargon ridden for many people.
 - Finally, industry considered their involvement was of critical importance to validate assessment decision making.
- ❖ Ensuring RPL issues are considered in the revision of the Training Package for Assessment and Workplace Training.

Introducing an RPL module in which students can enrol and receive the close support required. This already occurs in one jurisdiction as outlined in the body of this report. The module approach highlights that RPL is a learning process in its own right. It also acknowledges teachers' time

involved in supporting and implementing the recognition process. It may also assist with identifying and capturing all forms of RPL activity in the national data collection.

RPL costs and resourcing

The discussion around funding models and fees and charges is a complex one as outlined earlier.

A range of resourcing and costing models exists across the jurisdictions (refer to table 9). To many providers working across states and territories the range of models can be confusing and in some cases discriminatory.

The Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board (1997) report emphasised that a 'consistent and transparent policy on funding and resources for RPL ... would assist with its promotion and providers' motivation' (p.8). The report recommended that policy settings must encourage the provision and development of cost-effective RPL assessment. It may be that state and territory authorities should give consideration to these suggestions.

The National Training Quality Council should consider two suggestions:

- ✧ Advocating that RPL be counted by the Australian National Training Authority, and that state training authorities fund registered training organisations for the process, at the same rate as the training program itself, to remove any financial disincentive to RPL uptake and to provide additional resources to improve assessment practice. This would also reinforce that RPL outcomes are equal to training pathway outcomes.
- ✧ Having further work undertaken on the resourcing and costing of RPL with a view to achieving greater transparency at the very least and possibly also greater consistency in policies across the nation to avoid confusion and possible discrimination.

Equity considerations

Registered training organisations considered more could be done to assist applicants from equity groups to use RPL and cited similar barriers to RPL uptake for these groups as were recorded for all, including language, complexity of process and lack of ongoing support. However, members of equity groups themselves suggested they were more likely to participate in training rather than seek recognition of their existing skills and identified other benefits, such as social dimension, as outweighing the benefits to be gained by RPL. Greater collaboration between assessors, the community and equity support personnel would enhance possible uptake in RPL by equity groups, as would the use of group processes.

The opinion of state training authorities is that the process the registered training organisations put in place is the most important factor for ensuring that different groups are provided with an informative and supportive process.

A suggestion that the National Training Quality Council could consider:

- ✧ Encouraging the development and promotion of RPL practical case study examples and developing and promoting the range of strategies identified within this report to minimise cost, time and simplify RPL processes and to encourage more learners to engage with the RPL process.

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Appendix 1: Methodology

Aim

This research project aimed to:

- ❖ summarise current statistical information on recognition-related activity issues with system and provider-level reporting
- ❖ map current resources and materials available to support RPL and review their usage and awareness
- ❖ outline state and territory recognition practices and funding at both system and provider level and compliance with standards for registered training organisations
- ❖ identify and analyse the drivers and barriers to the effective implementation of RPL (including individual, industry-specific, provider and system-based case studies where relevant)
- ❖ provide advice on the key issues and implications for registered training organisation compliance with RPL requirements of the standards
- ❖ provide advice to the National Training Qualifications Council on how best to support registered training organisation compliance with the standards.

Issues explored

Definition of and benchmarks for RPL

A focus of this research was to explore the benefits and implications of current RPL practice as perceived by the various provider and user groups and how these relate to the data presented. Issues explored in this project regarding definition and language included the following questions:

- ❖ How does 'recognition' terminology in current use shape registered training organisation recognition practices?
- ❖ Are the current definitions (of RPL, recognition of current competencies, credit transfer) adequate or could they be improved?
- ❖ Do problems of definition affect the reporting of RPL outcomes?

System reporting on RPL activity

In 2000, RPL activity represented 2.5% of total VET collection hours with credit transfer outcomes totalling another 3.9%. These figures reflect a low level and/or static level in the uptake of RPL. A wider issue is the accuracy and consistency of reporting systems to collect and analyse data on recognition activities.

The percentage of outcomes that are obtained via RPL is considered low as reported under the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS). The AVETMISS data may be considered problematic as it is unclear whether this uptake reflects current practice or in fact reflects the effects of barriers to implementation. Of interest, therefore, is what are the perceived barriers and issues when implementing RPL within

registered training organisations, especially with the requirements of Australian Quality Training Framework and of the funding models. How these issues impacted on the data recorded and therefore affect the interpretation and analysis is crucial to any further discussions related to RPL and an integral area of investigation for this project.

Issues explored in this project with relation to system reporting included:

- ✧ What do RPL outcomes statistics really mean? What are the reasons for the differences between state/territory module outcomes for RPL and CT?
- ✧ How do the figures reflect on registered training organisations' AQTF compliance readiness?

Conditions on the granting and resourcing of RPL

The effectiveness of RPL as an assessment tool is dependent on implementation conditions and on financial systems or incentives that support or reward its use.

Questions addressed on this issue included:

- ✧ What funding models for resourcing and costing RPL activity are in place at a national level and in particular jurisdictions?
- ✧ What policy conditions on granting RPL are in place at a national level and in particular jurisdictions?
- ✧ How do current RPL funding models and policy conditions support registered training organisation recognition processes to meet the requirements of the standards for registered training organisations?
- ✧ What incentives and/or disincentives are currently in evidence?
- ✧ Are some types of providers (i.e. TAFE, community providers and private providers) more likely to grant RPL than others?

Client RPL awareness, experiences and marketing

A range of national and locally developed resources are available for registered training organisations to support them in designing and implementing RPL processes, yet registered training organisations' RPL module outcomes statistics indicate a low and static level of activity. The *National Marketing Strategy for VET* (June 2000) includes the simplification of RPL processes as one of its five overarching initiatives. The report identified significant barriers to the streamlined implementation of RPL processes. These included funding arrangements, bureaucratic paperwork requirements, inconsistent policies and practices.

- ✧ How aware are clients of the VET system of the availability of RPL? How do they find information on RPL opportunities?
- ✧ What lessons can be learnt from client experiences with current RPL processes?
- ✧ Are some industry sectors or particular 'courses' more critical for promoting RPL processes?
- ✧ How timely is it for a targeted RPL marketing campaign? If so, who/what groups would best promote RPL?
- ✧ What is the extent of uptake of RPL among VET students, and how has this varied over time?
- ✧ What 'other' RPL initiatives are in the system?

Equity considerations

Any recognition activity has three critical elements: consideration of the candidates' needs; integrity of the assessment process; and resources needed to conduct assessments. These three elements are also often seen as conflicting, which has implications on how, in any RPL activity, equity is assured and competing demands met. To address these issues the following questions were included:

- ◇ What equity issues surround registered training organisation compliance with the Standards' RPL requirements?
- ◇ Do students from access and equity groups have fair and reasonable access to RPL?

Australian Quality Training Framework related

As the Australian Quality Training Framework standards for registered training organisations have recently been implemented, additional questions to be explored are considered timely and pertinent:

- ◇ What strategies are registered training organisations using to identify whether they have a gap or deficiency when comparing their current RPL practice to the requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework?
- ◇ What are the perceived barriers for registered training organisations in implementing change(s) in their approach to RPL to meet the new requirements?
- ◇ What strategies have registered training organisations implemented to address the framework? e.g. information material, information/support sessions?
- ◇ How have registered training organisations determined a cost effective and time efficient procedure for RPL?
- ◇ How have registered training organisations determined the cost/price for RPL services? What are the cost variations across registered training organisations?
- ◇ What are the key issues facing registered training organisations implementing the Australian Quality Training Framework RPL requirements and what strategies are they employing to deal with them?

General

In addition the following research questions were considered pertinent:

- ◇ How effective are the procedures used by the different states and territories to monitor and audit the conduct of RPL by their registered training organisations?
- ◇ Are students who are granted RPL more likely to obtain a recognised qualification than those without?

Project methodology

The methodology consisted of:

- ◇ literature review
- ◇ environmental scan of current policies and procedures
- ◇ data analysis of national AVETMISS data
- ◇ structured interviews
- ◇ focus groups
- ◇ national forum.

Literature review

The literature review provided existing baseline information on all of the identified key issues: definition of and benchmarks for recognition of prior learning; system reporting on RPL activity; conditions on and resourcing of RPL; client RPL awareness, experiences and marketing, and equity considerations.

Environmental scan

Central to this part of the research was an analysis of examples of RPL-related documentation collected from the organisations participating in the investigation. A desktop audit of RPL policy, guidelines and processes employed by state training authorities and a range of registered training organisations was conducted. The information was drawn from both electronic and print-based sources and also from interviews with state training authorities.

The documents examined included:

- ◇ state-level policies and guidelines related to RPL
- ◇ provider-specific policy and procedures, especially as evidenced in procedural manuals, RPL assessor guidelines and information and application forms for applicants seeking recognition of their skills
- ◇ other relevant documents such as marketing material.

The contents of these documents were analysed and classified in a structured fashion using document analysis worksheets to determine which components, intents, strategies and audiences were common to many, and which were unique to certain contexts. Of most importance in this systematic review was the determination of the extent of compliance with the requirements of the RPL-related standards in the Australian Quality Training Framework. The researchers designed a framework against which evidence of compliance in the documentation could be mapped. From this analysis an assessment was made about the extent and quality of RPL policy implementation.

Statistical analysis

A review of statistical information on recognition-related system activity (and its relationship with system and provider reporting on and uptake of RPL) was conducted using AVETMISS data (maintained by NCVER), see appendix 2.

The analysis considered the proportion of module enrolments reported as status or credit through RPL, and the proportion of students who have been granted status or credit through RPL. Trends over time were examined, and the statistics broken down by various market segments to determine the extent and materiality of the variation among them. The segments included student factors (e.g. age, sex, apprentice/trainee, school status, access and equity groups), program factors (e.g. qualification level) and provider factors (e.g. provider sector).

Statistical analysis of the national database also allowed the research team to identify systems and providers where the take-up of RPL was particularly high or particularly low. This supported the qualitative aspects of the research in seeking to identify factors which promote or inhibit the provision of recognition services by registered training organisations.

Interviews and focus groups

Key sources of information for this review were:

- ◇ relevant state and territory training authority officers
- ◇ representatives of ANTA, industry training advisory bodies, unions, professional and industry associations together with community organisations
- ◇ registered training organisations senior managers responsible for delivery and implementation of policy, such as heads of schools, heads of departments or their equivalents, together with those responsible for the management of academic records management systems
- ◇ teachers, trainers and assessors involved in the RPL process
- ◇ students in institutional settings and employees in enterprise settings
- ◇ employers of apprentices and trainees.

Every attempt was made to access a sample that was representative of the VET population, particularly with regard to balance between states and territories, large and small registered training organisations, private and public providers, metropolitan and regional locations, and industry areas.

Number of interviews

The total number of interviews conducted appears in table 10. The full sample appears in table 12. Managers or co-ordinators of RPL and assessors were interviewed in each registered training organisation.

Table 10: Interview summary

Source	No. of organisations	No. of interviews
Public provider	17	50
Private provider	11	22
Enterprise RTOs	8	15
Auspiced partnerships	0	0
Assessment-only RTOs	4	4
Students	10	42
ITABs	5	5
State/territory training authority	8	8
Other	1	1
Total		128

Table 11: Registered training organisation state/territory summary

State/territory	Public RTOs	Private RTOs	Total
ACT	1	1	2
New South Wales	3	2	5
Northern Territory	1	0	1
Queensland	2	2	4
South Australia	3	3	6
Tasmania	1	1	2
Victoria	3	2	5
Western Australia	3	0	3
Total	17	11	28

Table 12: Organisations consulted in this research

NSW RTOs	Tasmanian RTOs
North Sydney Institute of TAFE	TAFE Tasmania
South Western Sydney Institute of TAFE	Willson Training
Sydney Institute of TAFE	Northern Territory RTOs
Fitzroy Training Centre	Northern Territory University (TAFE Division)
Real Estate Institute of NSW	Northern Territory Correctional Services
Victorian RTOs	Enterprises
Swinburne University (TAFE Division)	State Transit Authority of NSW
The University of Ballarat (TAFE Division)	Chubb Protective Services
The Gordon Institute of TAFE	Centrelink
Workplace Connect	Woolworths Ltd (NSW)
Retail Training Solutions	Electrolux Home Products Pty Ltd
Queensland RTOs	Ella Bache
Cooloola Sunshine Institute of TAFE	Assessment-only RTOs
Brisbane Institute of TAFE	Manufacturing Learning Victoria
Logan Institute of TAFE	FAFPESC Assessment Pty Ltd
Institute of Business & Industry Training	VETASSESS
Business Success	Automotive Training Australia
South Australian RTOs	ITABS
Regency Institute of TAFE	Australian Light Manufacturing
Douglas Mawson Institute of TAFE	Information Technology and Telecommunications
Torrens Valley Institute of TAFE	Seafood Training Tasmania (Inc)
Civil Skills and Technology Centre	Other industry
The Quality Training Company	Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Gowrie Training & Resource Centre	State Training Authorities
Western Australian RTOs	ACT Accreditation & Registration Council
Central TAFE	Department of Employment Education & Training, NT
South East Metropolitan TAFE	Department of Training, WA
Challenger TAFE	NSW Vocational Education & Training Accreditation Board
ACT RTOs	Office of Post-Compulsory Education, Tas.
Canberra Institute of Technology	SA Accreditation & Registration Council
Training for Health & Community Services (TRACHS)	Training Recognition Council, Qld
	Office of Employment Training & Tertiary Education, Vic.

Structure of interviews

After selecting the sample of registered training organisations, initial contact was made with chief executive officers to gain approval for involvement in the research. Consent was formally sought from all participants.

Questionnaires were developed for state training authorities, finance officers, registered training organisations and students. Although some structured questions were developed for enterprise registered training organisations, auspiced organisations and industry training advisory bodies, these interviews required a more unstructured approach. Whilst unique interview schedules were designed for each category of informant, information on issues relating to awareness, experiences, marketing and equity considerations were also elicited from each informant. Interview schedules, information guides and interview protocols were developed to ensure that data was systematically gathered across those being interviewed and those conducting the interviews. All documentation associated with the interviews was trialled prior to use in the field.

A part-structured and semi-structured interview strategy was utilised in either individual or small group settings. Rather than having an open-ended discussion around the research questions, this

strategy ensured that interviews remained focused, while at the same time offered opportunities for individual experiences and perspectives to emerge.

Where feasible, interviews were conducted face to face. However, it was recognised that the short time frame provided for this research precluded extensive interstate travel and as a consequence some individual interviews were conducted by telephone. Informants from Tasmania, the Northern Territory and Western Australia were interviewed in this manner.

Records of all interviews were taken by hand and audio taped, where possible, for later transcription. In addition, individual interviewers did not conduct interviews on site or with any organisation where they have had a role or relationship. Analysis was undertaken using a categorisation strategy, where common threads and issues were identified.

Limitations to the study

It was originally intended to conduct interviews with representatives from each state and/or territory training authority, from 15 public registered training organisations and eight private registered training organisations drawn from across all states and territories; four assessment-only registered training organisations; 10 enterprise registered training organisations and three auspiced arrangements.

The targets were achieved for all bar the latter two categories. Enterprise registered training organisations proved to be particularly challenging and achieving the desired levels of interviews was not reached. Busy schedules and pressing internal/productivity demands affected which enterprise registered training organisations and in particular the most appropriate person who could be interviewed. None of the organisations involved in auspiced arrangements responded to the request to participate in the study.

The private registered training organisations nominated as having RPL activity in Western Australia and the Northern Territory failed to respond to the request to participate and no others could be contacted in time to be included in the research.

The timing and nature of the project and requirement for initial mail contact with telephone follow-up (not only to request responses but to then determine appropriate personnel across the organisations) meant that delays were unavoidable. Thus the interviews were limited to organisations who were readily available. Therefore the sample of people to be interviewed was dependent to a large extent on convenience and willingness to be interviewed.

Gaining access to students within organisations proved to be very difficult. A number of registered training organisations invited students to attend focus groups and went to great lengths to provide approval and access to their students. However, the requirement of obtaining approval, of addressing privacy issues and then encouraging students/candidates to attend focus groups proved insurmountable for some. A number of students responded to the questions individually (in writing or verbally) but the number of interviews achieved fell far short of the designated 100.

A number of the industry training advisory bodies also did not respond to the request to participate and as a consequence others were substituted to fill the void.

The majority of public registered training organisations that agreed to participate in the research provided promotional material of RPL policies. Some private providers were less forthcoming with their materials and in a number of instances enterprise registered training organisations did not have the documentation in a form that could be issued to the researchers.

Finally, data provided through Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standards is limited to registered training organisations in receipt of government funding, as part of their performance agreement. This means that registered training organisations not in receipt of government funding are not required to submit data returns and

therefore the statistical data at a national level for these organisations is non-existent. In addition, the data reflect the returns as submitted by each registered training organisation and therefore depends on their understanding of RPL and their responsibilities in providing accurate data in their returns.

It should be noted, however that the Reframing the Future policy engagement forum on RPL provided an additional opportunity to gather information from approximately 40 stakeholders representing the diverse elements that make up the VET community. To some extent, this input compensated for the lack of input from some of those invited to participate in the study.

National RPL forum

A national policy engagement forum on RPL was convened by Reframing the Future and held in Melbourne on Wednesday 4 September 2002. The NCVER research team contributed the background paper and assisted with facilitating the forum. Three key questions were developed for discussion:

- ◇ How is RPL activity resourced in your jurisdictions?
- ◇ Do people from equity groups have ready access to your RPL services? If not, how can access be improved?
- ◇ What are the three key things that have to happen for RPL to be an effective and attractive process for all stakeholders?

The forum provided an opportunity for the project team to seek feedback from approximately 40 key VET stakeholders and subject matter experts on the research issues.

Project links

The project team liaised with the project team working concurrently on a cross-sectoral RPL project being conducted for the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board. The two project teams exchanged documents and key literature and co-ordinated, where possible, consultation methodologies. Findings from each project were shared as they became available.

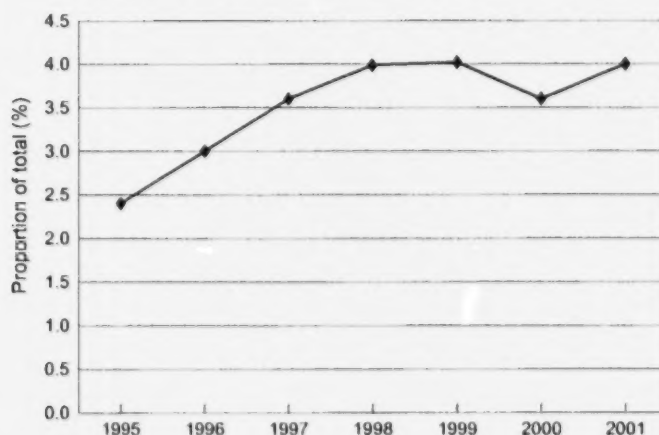
Appendix 2: Statistics

Students with RPL

The number of students with one or more RPL subjects increased consistently, from 30 000 in 1995 to 65 200 in 1999 (figure 1). In 2000, the number of students with RPL fell by 3000 to 62 200, down by 4.6% on 1999, but increased again in 2001 to 66 400. The reasons for this drop are unknown.

The proportion of students with RPL grew during the period, from 2.4% in 1995 to around 4.0% in 1998, 1999 and 2001. However, part of the increase in the earlier years (i.e. 1995 to 1996 and 1996 to 1997) is due to the development of systems by providers to separately record and report RPL outputs in student record systems. The fall in the number of students with RPL in 2000 also caused the proportion to fall, to 3.6%.

Figure 1: Proportion of students with RPL, 1995 to 2001



Scope: For figure 1, includes all students in the public VET sector, excluding schools data submitted by some states and territories, and students whose only subjects were for credit transfer. Owing to the phased implementation of national data collection arrangements, statistics for 1995 do not include government-funded delivery by private providers.

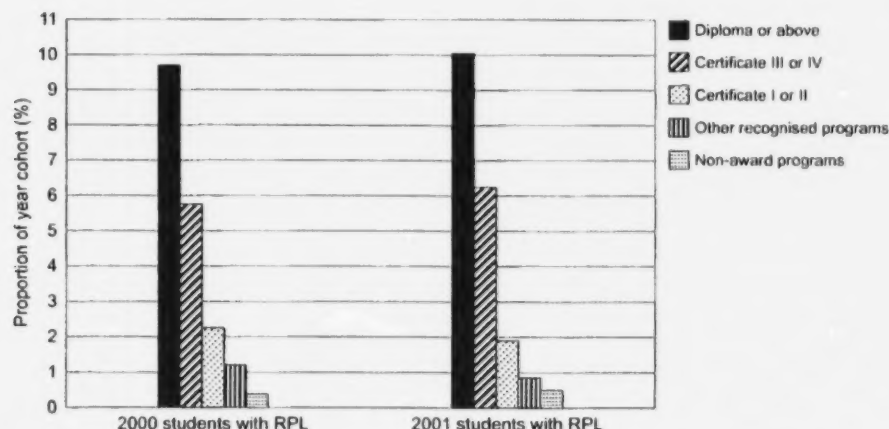
RPL by qualification category

The incidence of RPL increases with increasing Australian Qualifications Framework level (figure 2). For example, 9.7% of diploma and higher-level students in 2000 and 10.1% in 2001 had RPL subjects. By contrast, for students in Australian Qualifications Framework certificate I or II programs, the corresponding proportions are 2.3% and 1.9%, roughly a quarter the rates for students in diploma and higher-level programs and well below the overall rates.

Even lower rates are observed for students undertaking recognised programs which do not lead to an Australian Qualifications Framework or equivalent level qualification. Here the incidence of RPL is 1.2% and 0.8% for 2000 and 2001 respectively. Clearly, RPL is of minor importance for the

students undertaking these programs. Finally, RPL is of practically no importance for students enrolled in non-award and subject-only programs, with rates close to zero for all years from 1995 to 2001.

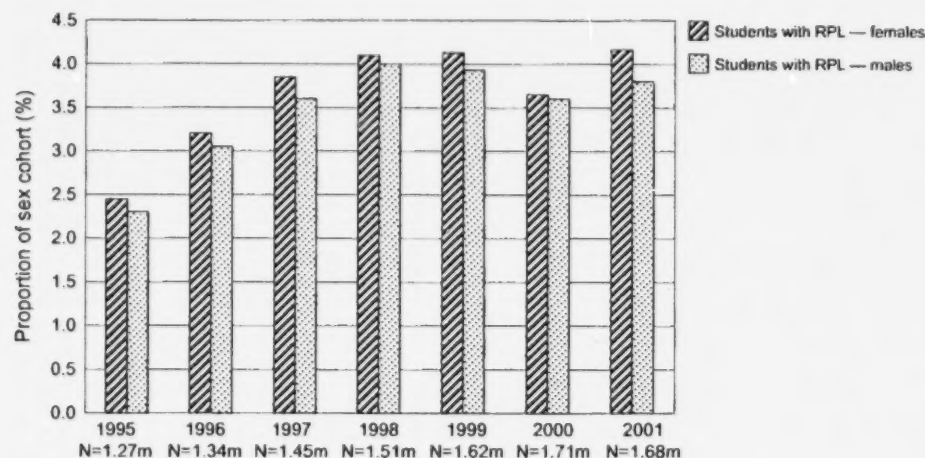
Figure 2: Students with RPL by qualification level of major course, 2000 and 2001



RPL students by sex and age

Although the proportion of students with RPL has varied in the period under consideration, the number of females relative to males with RPL has been almost equal (figure 3).

Figure 3: Proportion of students with subject enrolments granted RPL, by sex, 1995 to 2001



The graph shows that females are slightly more likely than males to have RPL but the difference is negligible in terms of its materiality. It should be noted that the drop in the proportion of students with RPL from 1999 to 2000 also signalled a drop in the number of students with RPL, for both males and females (from 32 700 to 30 900 for females, and 32 400 to 31 200 for males).

In contrast to the male and female patterns, a student's age is found to have an important bearing on the likelihood of having RPL (table 13).

The incidence of RPL is greatest, and effectively the same, for students in the 20 to 24 and 25 to 39 age groups (in the range 4.6% to 5.0% from 1997 to 2001).

The next most important age group for RPL is students aged 40 to 64 years, where the rate has been consistently close to the overall rate.

As would be expected, the rate for young people up to 19 years of age is lower than for older students, falling in the range 2.5% to 2.1% from 1997 to 2001, in contrast to an overall rate in the range 3.6% to 4.0% in these years.

Among the range of factors which affect RPL, age appears to be the second in importance after the Australian Qualifications Framework category of the program undertaken.

Table 13: Incidence of RPL, by age group, 1995 to 2001

Age at 30 June	Students with RPL subjects						
	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
	<i>Proportion of age cohort (per cent)</i>						
Up to 19 yrs	1.3	1.6	2.5	2.6	2.5	2.2	2.1
20 to 24 years	3.2	3.8	4.6	5.1	4.9	4.5	4.6
25 to 39 years	3.1	3.9	4.6	5.0	5.0	4.6	5.0
40 to 64 years	2.4	3.0	3.6	3.9	4.2	3.7	4.3
Other ^(a)	0.5	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.9	1.3	1.4
All ages	2.4	3.0	3.6	4.0	4.0	3.6	4.0
N ('000 000)	1.27	1.34	1.45	1.51	1.62	1.71	1.68

Note: ^(a) Includes students whose reported age is unknown, less than five years or more than 64 years.

RPL by field of study

As with the Australian Qualifications Framework category, the incidence of RPL varies considerably among the fields of study, ranging from 0.9% for VET multi-field education programs to 8.4% for education programs. In fact, the incidence of RPL is close to or higher than the overall rate of 3.6% in 2000 for all fields of study except VET multi-field education. The very different pattern for VET multi-field education is a consequence of the fact that this field of study includes many general education and preparatory courses. These courses are often taken by young people who are less likely to have previous education or training, or equivalent experiences, which would entitle them to RPL.

Table 14: Students with RPL by field of study of major course, 2000

Field of study for major course undertaken in 2000 ^(a)	RPL	No RPL	Total	% of total students
Proportion of row total (per cent)				
No major course, or 'subject only' ^(b)	0.1	99.9	100.0	5.0
Land and marine resources, animal husbandry	3.7	96.3	100.0	5.3
Architecture, building	3.4	96.6	100.0	4.8
Art, humanities and social sciences	3.5	96.5	100.0	6.8
Business, administration, economics	3.8	96.2	100.0	20.3
Education	8.4	91.6	100.0	2.6
Engineering, surveying	4.8	95.2	100.0	11.7
Health, community services	6.6	93.4	100.0	8.1
Law, legal studies	4.4	95.6	100.0	0.6
Science	4.5	95.5	100.0	6.8
Veterinary science, animal care	8.3	91.7	100.0	0.2
Services, hospitality, transportation	3.0	97.0	100.0	16.7
VET multi-field education	0.9	99.1	100.0	11.1
All programs	3.6	96.4	100.0	100.0
Number of students ('000)	62.2	1 609.9	1 713.4	

Notes: ^(a) Where students have undertaken more than one VET program in the year, the program with the highest Australian Qualifications Framework level is taken first. If there is still a tie, the program with the largest number of enrolment hours is taken, followed by the program which is not VET multi-field education.

^(b) For some students who have undertaken more than one course in a year, it is not possible to determine a 'major course' for the year. For 'module-only' activity, where the student enrolls in modules but not a course, a field of study cannot be assigned as the field of study classification used in AVETMISS is assigned at the course level. The new Australian Classification of Education (ASCED) developed by the ABS will resolve this difficulty.

RPL is more prominent among certain fields of study than others, including (in 2000, table 14):

- ✧ Education (8.4% of students with RPL) and veterinary science and animal care (8.3%). However, the number of students in these fields of study is relatively small (2.6% and 0.2% of total students, respectively).
- ✧ Health and community services, where 6.6% of students had RPL. The number of students here is much greater than in the two fields noted above (8.1% of the total).
- ✧ Science (4.5%) and engineering and surveying (4.8%) are two other fields of study with above-average numbers of students with RPL. These fields of study account for 6.8% and 11.7% of students, respectively.
- ✧ Most of the remaining fields of study have RPL rates which are close to the overall rate. An exception is services, hospitality and transportation, where the rate is 3.0%, in contrast to 3.6% overall. This field of study is the second largest, accounting for 16.7% of students.

As noted above, it is unlikely that the incidence of RPL among VET multi-field education students could be much higher. Whether the incidence of RPL can, or should be, greater among the other fields of study, particularly those with below-average rates, is not a question which can be answered from the available information.

RPL among specific student equity groups

The statistics consider in broad terms the extent to which students from specific access and equity groups are granted RPL (table 15). RPL patterns for students in various access and equity groups are mixed. It is found, however, that rates of RPL among these student segments in some cases are lower than among students overall.

Table 15: Proportion of student segments with RPL, 1999 to 2001

	Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander			Reported disability			English-speaking background			
RPL subjects	Yes	No	Not known	Yes	No	Not known	Yes	No	Not known	Total students
1999 students										
RPL	1.9	4.0	4.3	3.5	4.0	4.2	3.9	4.2	4.2	4.0
No RPL	98.1	96.0	95.7	96.5	96.0	95.8	96.1	95.8	95.8	96.0
All students	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2000 students										
RPL	2.1	3.7	3.6	3.1	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.6	3.5	3.6
No RPL	97.9	96.3	96.4	96.9	96.4	96.3	96.3	96.4	96.5	96.4
All students	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2001 students										
RPL	2.1	3.8	5.0	3.1	3.7	5.7	3.7	3.9	5.1	4.0
No RPL	97.9	96.2	95.0	96.9	96.3	94.3	96.3	96.1	94.9	96.0
All students	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Scope: as for previous tables and figures, i.e. includes all VET students except for the schools data submitted by some states and territories and students whose only subject results were for credit transfer.

RPL by subject enrolments

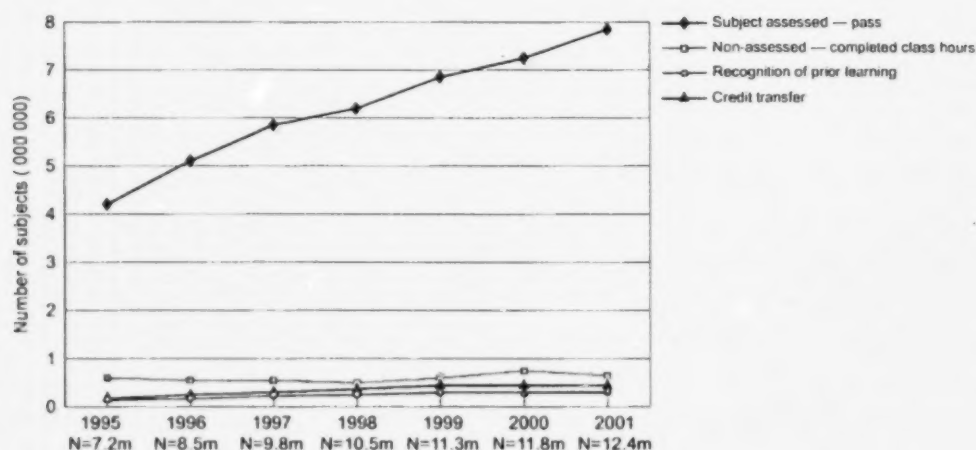
Subject results show that while RPL is important, overall it is relatively small in comparison with the major subject results, including an assessment leading to a pass (figure 4). On the other hand, successful completion of non-assessed subjects (e.g. work experience, field placement and other time-on-task subjects), which is reported nationally under the heading 'no assessment – satisfactory completion of class hours', is also relatively small and similar in number to RPL subjects.⁸

Over the period 1995 to 2001 (figure 4, and the underlying statistics, not shown):

- ✧ Subject passes have increased consistently in number, from 4.14 million in 1995 to 7.82 million in 2001, in line with the consistent increase in total subject enrolments. In recent years passes have comprised around 60% of all subject enrolments and around 84% of subject completions.
- ✧ Subject results of satisfactory completion without an assessment have been more constant, with a low of 0.51 million in 1998, a high of 0.75 million in 2000 and a fall to 0.66 million in 2001 (changes to the reporting standard from 1999 have affected the apparent trend, which was reasonably flat until 1998).
- ✧ RPL subjects have increased consistently in number, from 0.11 million in 1995 to 0.33 million in 2001. RPL as a proportion of all subject enrolments has been constant, at 2.6%, from 1998 to 2000 and 2.7% in 2001. However, as a proportion of subject completions, RPL has fluctuated somewhat more, in the range 3.3% to 3.8% from 1997 to 2001.
- ✧ The trends for RPL subjects as a proportion of the total provide a picture which is similar to that obtained from the trends at the student level.

⁸ Changes to the AVETMIS Standard from 1999 must be taken into account when analysing subject completions over time, but do not alter the main trends.

Figure 4: Number of completed or recognised subjects, 1995 to 2001



Annual hours

Annual hours are used by state training authorities and ANTA for funding purposes. They are based on the *standard* curriculum hours for each subject when undertaken in a supervised delivery mode (usually in a classroom or instruction site), although some students undertake subjects in self-paced learning, flexible delivery or distance learning modes.

Annual hours have significant limitations as a measure of VET provision and outputs, and this is particularly the case with reporting RPL. However, since annual hours are the standard measure currently in use, the NCVET analysis applies full curriculum hours to each RPL subject.

The key trends:

- ✧ The proportion of total annual hours associated with RPL rose from 1.5% in 1995 to 2.7% in 2001.
- ✧ The incidence of RPL in the public VET system, in terms of proportions, has been steadily increasing.

Table 16: Annual hours by subject result, 1995 to 2001

Subject result	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Proportion of year cohort N (per cent)							
Pass	54.3	56.6	57.2	57.1	58.9	60.4	61.3
Completed class hours	10.2	8.0	6.9	5.7	5.1	4.9	4.8
Recognition of prior learning	1.5	1.8	2.1	2.5	2.5	2.6	2.7
Credit transfer	2.7	2.6	3.0	3.2	3.5	3.4	3.1
Sub-total — successful completion	68.8	68.9	69.3	68.5	69.9	71.3	71.8
Not assessed — continuing	6.6	6.0	5.3	7.3	6.9	6.3	6.3
Other (withdrawn, fail etc.)	24.6	25.0	25.5	24.2	23.2	22.4	21.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N ('000 000)	270.62	284.99	301.48	308.80	324.84	336.31	367.60

RPL activity across provider sectors

The statistics show that there are significant variations among the training provider sectors in the proportion of students who are granted RPL (table 17). The proportion of students with RPL is highest in the TAFE sector, and this has been consistently the case:

- ✧ In the TAFE and other government sector, 5.0% of students in 1998 and 1999 had subject enrolments with an RPL outcome. The reasons for the drop to 4.3% in 2000 are unknown, but the figure of 4.7% in 2001 approaches, again, the 1998-99 levels.
- ✧ The proportion of students with RPL in the private provider sector is lower than in the TAFE sector, but has grown much more rapidly, from 0.9% in 1996 to 3.0% in 2001.
- ✧ The incidence of RPL is lowest in the community provider sector, probably as a consequence of the fact that completion of recognised qualifications appears to be even less important for community provider students than in the other two sectors. However, in comparison with earlier years, the incidence of RPL in the community provider sector increased from 0.2% of students in 1999 to 0.7% in 2000, and 0.6% in 2001.

Table 17: Students with RPL subject outcomes, by provider sector, 1995 to 2000

Sector	% of all students			% of annual cohort with RPL					
	1996	1998	2000	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Community providers	15.3	15.3	13.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.7	0.6
Private providers	1.7 ^(a)	8.6	9.6	0.9	1.7	1.9	2.4	2.6	3.0
TAFE & other government	82.9	76.1	77.2	3.6	4.4	5.0	5.0	4.3	4.7
All public providers	100.0	100.0	100.0	3.0	3.6	4.0	4.0	3.6	4.0
No. of students ('000)	1340.8	1509.7	1713.4	40.1	51.7	59.7	65.2	62.2	66.4

Note: ^(a) understated, as 1996 was the first year in which private providers in receipt of public funds were included in the national VET data collection.

Some variation in the incidence of RPL for males and females is observed among the three major sectors. For example, in 2001:

- ✧ In the private provider sector, the proportion of males and females with RPL was effectively the same (2.9% and 3.1% respectively).
- ✧ By contrast, in the TAFE sector, females are somewhat more likely than males to have RPL (5.2% and 4.2%, respectively).
- ✧ In the community provider sector, female RPL students outnumber males. However, the number of students with RPL is relatively small and does not allow conclusions to be drawn with any confidence.

While there appears to be good reason for the low rates of RPL in the community provider sector, explanations for the other variations noted above are largely speculative. One possibility is that the promotion of recognition services started much earlier in the TAFE system than in the private sector. This would explain the higher rates of RPL in TAFE relative to private providers, but does not explain why, for example, RPL rates in TAFE are higher for females than males, whereas they are effectively the same in private providers.

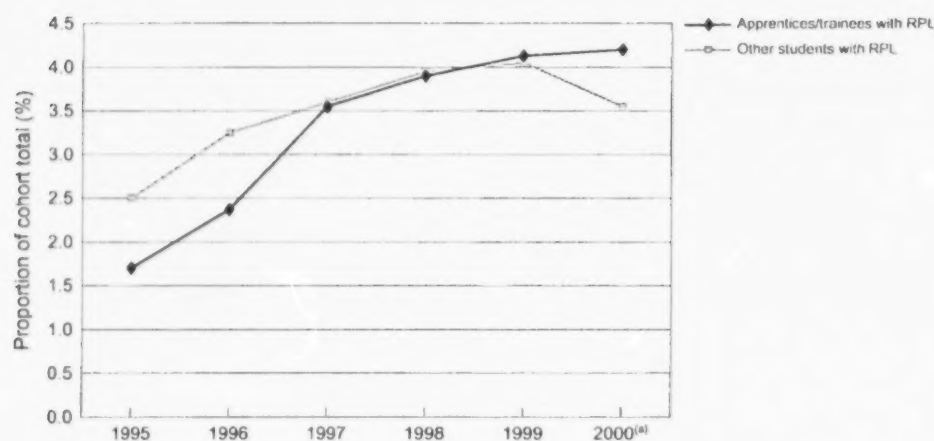
Clearly, what cannot be determined from the reported data is whether the differences in RPL take-up are due to variation in provider practices and systems, or differences in the extent to which learners have the knowledge and skills which would qualify them for RPL.

RPL among apprentices and trainees

The importance of RPL for apprentices and trainees relative to other students has changed over time (figure 5). In 1995 and 1996 the incidence of RPL was lower among apprentices and trainees (1.7% and 2.4% respectively) relative to other students (2.5% and 3.1%, respectively). By contrast, from 1997 to 1999, the incidence of RPL was effectively the same for apprentices and trainees and other students, despite the fact that the proportion of VET students with RPL continued to rise. The trend was reversed in 2000, with 4.2% of apprentices and trainees having RPL, in contrast to 3.5% for other students.

An important factor in this shift is likely to be the increasing number of apprentices and trainees in recent years, many of whom are older and hence more likely to have skills and experience which would qualify them for RPL. By contrast, traditional apprentices, who dominated the apprenticeship and traineeship system in the past, were generally young and less likely to have skills and experience which would qualify them for RPL.

Figure 5: Proportion of students with RPL, apprentices/trainees and other students, 1995 to 2000



Note: ^(a) preliminary figures only for apprentices and trainees enrolled with VET providers in 2000. Also, figures are not yet available for apprentices and trainees enrolled with VET providers in 2001.

Effect of RPL on helping learners to gain a VET qualification

Outputs from vocational education and training take two major forms, depending on the needs of the individual:

- ❖ Successful completion of subjects, where 'successful completion' refers to an assessment leading to a pass, an assessment leading to RPL and for non-assessed subjects, satisfactory completion of class hours (e.g. completing a prescribed amount of work experience). It should also be noted that credit transfer is not counted as an output as it reflects subjects which have been passed in some other education or training institution.
- ❖ Successful completion of a recognised qualification. This may be the qualification associated with a particular course of study or an approved exit qualification if only part of the course has been completed. For a variety of reasons, qualification completions reported in the national collection of VET provider data are understated.

Although eligibility for recognised qualifications is understated in the national collection of data from VET providers, there is sufficient information to show that students who are granted RPL for one or more subjects in their first year of enrolment are considerably more likely to complete a recognised qualification (table 18). The cohort used for the analysis is the VET students who enrolled in 1997, either for the first time or after a break of at least two years.

However, it is important to put this finding into perspective, as the number of students granted RPL in their first year who have a qualification completion reported is quite small. Moreover, other work undertaken by NCVER (unpublished) indicates that the major factors which increase the likelihood of completing a qualification include being enrolled for more than one year, undertaking a course at higher Australian Qualifications Framework levels, being an apprentice or trainee and starting VET while young, while still at school or as a school leaver. Being granted RPL is clearly a major plus factor for those students who are entitled to it, but the impact of this group on overall qualification completions is relatively small.

The key finding for students who enrolled for one year only (i.e. 1997) is that the proportion with RPL increases with the Australian Qualifications Framework level of the output attained, from 1.5% or less for students who completed all subjects undertaken or attained a recognised, non-Australian Qualifications Framework qualification, to 10.5% for those attaining an Australian Qualifications Framework certificate III or IV qualification and 14.6% for those attaining an Australian Qualifications Framework diploma or advanced diploma.

Table 18: Proportion of students enrolled in 1997 only with RPL subjects, by highest level output

RPL subjects	Diploma & above	Cert III or IV or equivalent	Cert I or II or equivalent	Other recognised quals	All subjects completed	Some subjects completed	No subjects completed	Outputs unknown	All students
Proportion of total (%)									
RPL	14.6	10.5	4.9	1.0	1.5	3.8	n/a	n/a	1.5
No RPL	85.4	89.5	85.1	89.0	88.5	86.2	100.0	100.0	88.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
%	0.4	3.4	4.3	13.8	42.5	18.4	17.2	pro rated	100.0
N ('000)	1.52	12.81	16.43	52.06	160.66	69.65	65.21	143.13	521.45

The key findings for students who enrolled for more than one year are equally pronounced (table 19). Students completing a diploma or higher-level qualification are more likely to have RPL, while students with no qualification completions reported are also the least likely to have RPL subjects. Variations among the Australian Qualifications Framework levels of qualifications attained are also evident and follow the patterns observed for single-year students (i.e. the incidence of RPL increases with the level of qualification attained).

Table 19: Proportion of multi-year students starting in 1997 with RPL subjects, by highest level output

RPL subjects	Diploma & above	Cert III or IV or equivalent	Cert I or II or equivalent	Other recognised quals	All subjects completed	Some subjects completed	No subjects completed	Outputs unknown	All students
Proportion of total (%)									
RPL	15.6	10.8	5.8	1.6	3.6	5.4	0.0	n/a	3.5
No RPL	84.4	89.2	94.2	98.4	96.4	94.6	100.0	100.0	96.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
%	0.2	3.4	4.4	8.6	35.9	25.2	10.8	pro rated	100.0
N ('000)	0.61	9.77	12.72	24.92	103.91	73.09	31.33	143.13	289.59

Note: Students who started in 1997 are taken for this analysis because at least four years must be allowed before a reasonably complete picture of students' achievements is obtained. The figures are based on a large-majority sample (N=289 590) of multi-year students who started in 1997.

Quantifying the contribution of RPL to qualification completions

In order to quantify the contribution which RPL makes to course completions, we consider the proportion of completed subjects and annual hours which were due to RPL for students who are known to have completed a recognised qualification (table 20).

These statistics show that RPL contribute most to subjects credited, and by implication to qualification completions, at higher Australian Qualifications Framework levels:

- ✦ For students completing a diploma or higher-level qualification, RPL contributes 6.4% of the annual hours for subjects credited.
- ✦ For qualification completions at Australian Qualifications Framework certificate III and IV level, the proportion (3.9%) is lower but still well above the overall rate.
- ✦ For all other qualification completions, that is, Australian Qualifications Framework certificate I and II and RATE qualifications, and recognised non-Australian Qualifications Framework qualifications, the proportion is well below the overall rate.
- ✦ RPL contributes least to completions for students who obtain a recognised, non-Australian Qualifications Framework qualification.

These figures confirm that RPL has its greatest impact on subject credits for students who obtain a qualification at Australian Qualifications Framework certificate III level or higher. The saving in the annual hours of study which these students must undertake is around 4% for RPL.

It should be noted that the saving attributable to RPL is essentially the same when the number of subjects is considered, as there is effectively no difference between annual hours and the number of subjects in their relative contribution to completions.

Table 20: RPL for students starting in 1998 by reported qualification completion

	Diploma or higher level	Certificate III or IV	Certificate I or II	RATE certificate ^(a)	Non- AQF certificate	No reported quals	All students
RPL as % of completions ^(a)							
Subjects	6.1	4.0	2.2	2.4	1.6	3.1	3.3
Annual hours	6.4	3.9	2.0	2.3	1.5	3.1	3.3
RPL as % of all activity							
Subjects	5.7	3.5	1.8	2.1	1.3	1.8	2.3
Annual hours	5.9	3.4	1.6	2.0	1.2	1.7	2.2
Students in sample ('000)	11.70	48.11	43.84	10.43	86.93	655.56	856.57

Scope: Covers all students in the public VET system who were not enrolled in 1996 or 1997, excluding schools data. Qualification completions are the highest level reported for each learner from the combined 1998, 1999 and 2000 data. Information for completions in 2001 for students who started in 1998 has yet to be compiled.

Notes: ^(a) 'completions' are defined as all enrolments reported with a pass or satisfactory completion of class hours, plus RPL and credit transfer.

^(b) these are certificates accredited under arrangements for the Register of Australian Training and Education (RATE, now superseded by Australian Qualifications Framework and AQTF arrangements) where the equivalent level in the Australian Qualifications Framework is unknown.

Technical notes

The analysis of RPL statistics is based on data submitted to the national collection of VET data for 1995 to 2001, inclusive. The scope for this collection is all activity in the public VET system, and encompasses the following market segments:

- ❖ *Provider sector:* all delivery by TAFE and other government providers, community providers and other registered training organisations who have been allocated public funds to deliver VET programs.
- ❖ *Funding sources:* all delivery funded from state/territory and Commonwealth allocations for VET (often referred to as 'ANTA-agreement delivery'), all delivery funded from state/territory and Commonwealth specific-purpose allocations for VET and fee-for-service delivery by TAFE, other government and community providers.
- ❖ *Qualification levels:* delivery which leads to an Australian Qualifications Framework or equivalent qualification, delivery which leads to other recognised qualifications and delivery which is part of non-award VET programs.

The scope for the analysis is based on subject results reported by providers in the public vocational education and training sector. These include:

- ❖ institutes/colleges of technical and further education (TAFE)
- ❖ other government providers of VET (e.g. university VET divisions, agricultural colleges in some states, the VET part of multi-sector education and training providers)
- ❖ community education providers, where there is an administrative connection or funding arrangement with the state training authority
- ❖ other providers (mainly private providers) in receipt of government funds to deliver VET programs
- ❖ VET provision to school students where they are enrolled with providers in the above categories.

To ensure consistency of scope over time, secondary school data (i.e. VET-in-schools) submitted by some states is excluded. As a result of this exclusion, the figures presented in this report differ from those presented in NCVER statistical publications. Other exclusions include overseas campuses, non-VET programs (also known as 'stream 1000'), students whose only enrolments are for credit transfer or for the purposes of being issued with a recognised qualification and fee-for-service delivery by private providers (a small amount of this last category is outside the scope of the national VET collection but is reported, incidentally, to the national database).

Establishing the trends in RPL over time is problematic because of data limitations for the earlier years of the national data collection (1994 to 1997, inclusive). Not all providers were in a position to distinguish between upon-enrolment RPL and an assessment leading to a pass in the data submitted to the national database. As a result, at least part of the increase in the incidence of RPL in earlier years is due to improvements in reporting systems.



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